

LAURA BROWN

One hot night.
One big surprise.

ABOUT THAT *Night*



A romantic couple embracing at night. The man, with brown hair and a beard, is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and has his eyes closed, smiling. The woman, with long brown hair, is wearing a light blue t-shirt and is smiling at him. They are holding hands. The background is dark with out-of-focus purple and yellow lights.

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The Dating Itinerary.
The Burbs and the Bees
A Royal Disaster

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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LOVE
→struck→

Dear Reader,

Thank you for supporting a small publisher! Entangled prides itself on bringing you the highest quality romance you've come to expect, and we couldn't do it without your continued support. We love romance, and we hope this book leaves you with a smile on your face and joy in your heart.

xoxo

Liz Pelletier, Publisher

To my kid. The journey into motherhood is life-changing, stressful, and full of rewards. I wouldn't have it any other way. Well, maybe less stress, help your mother with that one!

Chapter One

Izzy Fineberg stood frozen in front of the agency building as if her new job description was “garden gnome impersonator” and not “office assistant.” *Breathe, Izzy, remember your childbirth classes.* Those were nine plus months ago, though, the reason why she had only now found her first postgraduate job. If only her damn feet would move.

She hadn’t used to be this way. Motherhood—single motherhood—had added a whole new level of responsibilities onto her shoulders. But it was time to stop leaning on her sister and put her degrees in Management and Deaf Studies to good use.

She sucked in her postpartum stomach and forced her legs into action. The small white building stood in a busy urban area, housing the Deaf agency at which she’d been fortunate to land a job. She pulled open the glass doors to the small reception area. It may not have had the most up-to-date furniture, but warm colors surrounded the space and she relaxed in the comforting environment. So what if her new coworkers would be more proficient in ASL than she was, Izzy thrived on challenges. Whether it meant beating her sister at cards, or eating the most hot dogs, or even jumping from the highest point and not breaking her ankle—okay, maybe a sprain—or her most recent success of graduating with a newborn, she had it covered.

Izzy was up for any challenge.

She had to be.

At the receptionist desk a little girl around six or seven years old colored on a sheet of loose paper. Her hair was set in multiple tight braids. Beside her, a Black woman wore a headset as she signed to her computer. Izzy guessed it was a video call, so she stood aside, trying not to think of her engorged, milk-filled breasts. She hadn't mentioned the whole making-milk thing when she interviewed and accepted this job, and if she didn't pump at some point she'd be leaking by the end of the day.

Of all the possible worst first day impressions that could happen, milk leaking from her nipples had never been a contender before today.

The call finished and the receptionist's dark brown eyes took in Izzy standing there in all her awkward fight-or-flight glory. *"Can I help you?"* she signed.

Izzy swallowed and raised her hands, fingerspelling her name and following it up with her sign name—her nickname with both Zs signed at once. In ASL, names didn't have predetermined signs; each one was custom fit for the user. At least two members of the community were needed to give someone a sign name, and Izzy was six months pregnant when she earned hers. *"Isabel Fineberg. I'm the new office assistant."*

The receptionist's face lit up. She removed her headset, standing to reveal a long black tunic top covering rainbow-striped leggings. *"Oh, hi! I'm Shanice."* She placed her hands on the little girl's shoulders. *"And this is Madisyn. She's helping me, since there's no school today. Isn't that right?"*

Madisyn nodded.

"Let me call Deanna. She takes care of all the new staff."

Izzy prided herself on catching Shanice's fingerspelling. A year and a half ago her fingerspelling reception skills had been crap, reason number one why she couldn't find Archie's father—she never caught the man's name.

She'd met him at a Deaf event, back when she could

barely sign, *"Hi my name is,"* never mind *"Are you sure that condom worked?"* But she hadn't forgotten him or the floppy blond hair and brown eyes that had inhabited her dreams since that fateful night. She'd gone to every Deaf event she could since then, hoping to find him again, but it was as though she'd had an immaculate conception.

Wouldn't be the first Jewish woman to experience one.

She shifted the bag on her shoulder, the one holding her lunch and pumping supplies, as she made small talk with Shanice. The receptionist was an interpreter student working in the community to improve her skills. Izzy still wasn't sure what she wanted to do long-term. Interpreting would give her more job flexibility, so it was something to consider for the future.

A woman with short brown hair came to the front desk, and Izzy remembered Deanna from her interviews. The casual yet professional attire said she could hold her own in a business meeting and also chase a toddler down the street, all without breaking a sweat. The woman had the same friendly smile she'd had before, the kind that could put even a scolded toddler at ease, and Izzy relaxed while shaking her hand.

Deanna took a moment to check on Madisyn's drawing. The little girl perked up at the attention, and Izzy took that to mean it wasn't unusual for Shanice's daughter to be at work with her.

She followed Deanna on the mini tour of the building and up to the second floor, where she signed her paperwork and went over company policies—including a "no dating coworkers" clause that Izzy didn't have any intention of questioning. Instead of policies, Izzy wanted to ask about the new social media manager, the person most in need of an assistant at the moment, and she'd be working with him first. He'd been only recently hired when she interviewed, so he hadn't been present. She hoped he also had the laid-back vibe everyone else projected.

Before she could ask about a private space to pump, they were on the move again. Deanna took her from office to office, making introductions, until they arrived at a closed door at the end of the hall. Izzy glanced at the label, NOLAN HOLTZMAN, SOCIAL MEDIA, as Deanna opened the door enough to stick a hand in. The light inside flashed before she opened it all the way, the Deaf equivalent of knocking.

A large desk sat off to the side in the small room. The man sitting there glanced up, wavy blond hair and brown eyes so familiar that Izzy's gut clenched. He wore a simple blue button-down, a far cry from the T-shirt with video game controllers on it she'd seen him in—and out of—before. Deanna provided introductions, but Izzy didn't need any, not when she finally knew the name of the social media director. Her new boss.

And her baby's father.

...

Nolan clicked through the multiple tabs he had open on his monitor, one to each of their social media pages and one to the agency website, which was in serious need of updating. The agency's online reach was practically barbaric compared to most others around. Outdated websites might be normal for most, but the Deaf Community depended on the advancement of technology to bring communication and accessibility.

And this agency didn't even have a video on their website. Or a Twitter account.

Or rather, they didn't have a Twitter account last week. Now they did, and he needed to get the word out.

As the state agency, the goal included preserving, protecting, and promoting the civil, human, and linguistic rights of the Deaf Community—those words proudly displayed on the webpage and pamphlets. And yet this basic lack of access contradicted those goals. Part of the

reason why he hit the ground running, this change was long overdue. Nolan glanced up at the flashing light, eyes going straight to the woman shifting on her feet outside his door, a woman he'd recognize anywhere.

Izzy.

He was vaguely aware of Deanna standing there as well, introducing them, but couldn't tear his gaze away from the long-haired beauty from his past. He'd wondered if his new assistant, this Isabel Fineberg, was the same Izzy he'd met at a Deaf event. But then he remembered that she'd been an early ASL student, and odds were it couldn't be her.

Nolan's karma didn't work those types of miracles. He had a five-to-one chance of seeing someone he most definitely did not want to see over someone he did. Finding someone standing there who he wanted to see? That took extra bonus points to achieve.

Achievement unlocked. Because there Izzy stood, staring at him as though she'd seen a ghost, as though his achievement unlocked *her* bad karma. She looked good, curvier than when they'd first met and just as enticing. He'd hoped their paths would cross again, but never expected it to be like this. What was it, two years since they met? Something like that. And she still got to him. It hadn't been the drinks or beer goggles or any of that crap. It had been her.

She shifted her bag on her shoulder, an uncomfortable vibe radiating off her.

Maybe the beer goggles were true for her.

He blinked and refocused on Deanna. This job was new to him, too, and he had every intention of proving himself. Ogling the female staff wouldn't do him any favors. And he didn't want to be that guy; he wanted to be the person to whom others felt comfortable enough to complain about that guy.

Somehow, he managed to respond to Deanna, though he didn't know what exactly he'd signed. And then they were

alone, Izzy and him, in his small office. The last time they'd been alone they'd been intoxicated and naked, and it had been the single hottest night of his life.

He glanced at the papers on his desk and took a breath. This wasn't a bar, this was work, and he needed to set a professional tone for the two of them.

Nolan got to his feet and rounded his desk. Izzy remained in the same spot she'd been in when she first laid eyes on him, bag on her shoulder, barely even breathing by the looks of it. She definitely wasn't happy to see him.

Ego blow received, and it wasn't even lunchtime.

"I know we've met before, but this is different. Let's start over. I'm Nolan, nice to meet you." He held out his hand, friendly smile on his face. What they had was a moment in the past, and with her working with him, for him, nothing more would ever come from their sordid tale. He expected Izzy to quickly shake his hand and then they'd move on.

Instead she stared at his hand as if he'd just sneezed into it, blinking rapidly as her gaze shifted from his hand to his face and back again. She shook her head, as though she held her own internal pep talk.

"Hi. Sorry. Hi," she finally signed. *"I didn't expect...sorry."* She thrust out her hand, placing it in his, and just like that night, the connection between them sparked.

He pulled his hand back. That connection did him no good anymore, not with them both working here. At least that proved his typical bad luck held.

"I know this is complicated. Why don't I explain to Deanna that we know each other and it's not a good idea to work together? I know the other staff have work for an assistant; it shouldn't be too much of a problem." For her, at least.

"No, I..." Izzy took the bag off her shoulder and placed it on the floor. *"I sign better than this now. Honest. I'm just surprised. I tried to find you and..."* She bit her lip, brown eyes wide and open and luring him in like a moth to the flame.

Again.

He needed to keep this professional and establish a working rapport they could each stick to. *"You tried to find me?"* His hands apparently didn't get the professional memo.

Her face shifted, in what way he couldn't tell, he only knew something changed. *"I did. And that's a conversation"*—she glanced around his office—*"not for here. Can we talk later?"*

His libido lurched at the prospect of later, but he squashed it down into the box it had crawled out of. Even if the office didn't have a no-dating policy, he was her superior and he'd do best not to take advantage of that. *"Sure. The coffee shop around the corner?"*

Izzy nodded. *"Yes. Thank you."*

She didn't relax. A nervous energy seemed to swirl around her. Curiosity nudged his gut, insisting he missed an important piece of information that Izzy held.

And he hadn't a clue what that could be.

Chapter Two

Archie looks like Nolan.

Izzy couldn't get the thought out of her head. Not in an identical way—no baby could look like a full-grown adult male with a delicious hint of blond stubble. She'd been studying their child since birth, overanalyzing every feature and detail. Any feature of Archie's that didn't match hers had to be from his father, and from that she'd reshaped the fading image of Nolan.

Yet the image in her head had nothing on the man. And she saw it now, the shape of his mouth, the angle of his jaw; father and son matched.

Her stomach churned, and she moved a hand there, wondering again if this coffee shop idea had been a bad one. She could have just told Nolan while they stood awkwardly in his office. But she needed a moment to gather her thoughts, to figure out how to tell him in the first place. Because, "*By the way, you've got a kid,*" didn't fly. The man deserved something more than that.

Once she figured out what.

She'd searched for him since before she'd learned she was pregnant, back when she *wanted* to find him, rather than *needed* to. A year and a half—that's how long she'd searched. He'd missed a lot with his kid, and regardless of what he did with that information, he needed to know his son existed.

She took a breath of the late afternoon air, reaching for her

phone as she headed for the coffee shop, perhaps the most important coffee shop meeting of her life. In need of moral support, and a few extra minutes babysitting time, she dialed her sister.

"Izzy? How's the new job?" Gaby's cheery voice contrasted with Izzy's spiraling life.

"It's him."

"It's who?"

"Nolan Holtzman."

"And that is...?" Gaby's voice trailed off, a teasing quality as if Izzy spoke in riddles. Crap, she probably did.

"The media manager I'm helping. And Archie's father."

A beat of silence, and then, "Holy shit! You found him?"

"Found him, working for him, it's a big mess."

"How'd he take the news?"

Izzy paused at the entrance of the coffee shop. "I didn't tell him yet. I'm meeting up with him now, outside of work. Please watch my kid for a little while longer?"

"Of course. Archie's fine. This is important."

Didn't she know it. She yearned for the days when the most important decision she had was which party to go to.

"How do I sign something like this?"

"Want me to text Levi while we talk?"

Izzy shook her head. Levi was Gaby's fiancé, who happened to be Deaf himself and an ASL professor. They'd been nice enough to take her in and help her care for Archie.

"No, you don't need to text Levi. I can do that if I need to. I know what signs I need, I just... How does one say this?"

"You explain the facts. That's all. Simple and straight to the point."

Izzy's stomach churned. She checked in the window and spotted Nolan already there, sitting at a small table. The lighting hit his blond hair, casting a shadow over his face. So handsome. She'd bring him home again if she could.

Which brought her right back to the initial problem at hand.

"Okay, I'm going in. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, you've got this. You're raising a nine-month-old on your own. You can tell the father."

Izzy disconnected the call and put her phone away. She wanted to go home and cuddle her son. Maybe when she did, she'd be able to tell him he had a dad.

Inside, the aroma of coffee tickled her nose, reminding her that a hit of caffeine would be a good thing. Her hands shook, though, too nervous to deal with coffee or anything other than what she'd come here for. She wove through the occupied tables until she settled in across from Nolan.

"*How was your first day?*" he asked, a smile on his face. He held himself in a lighthearted manner she feared she'd destroy in minutes. She also knew she had to.

"*Fine.*" Oy, look at her, all short and curt. "*I appreciate you helping me get set up today.*" As far as being a supervisor went, Nolan was great. He'd reviewed the tasks he needed her help with and got her set up on her computer in the assistant/intern area. She kept glancing at him now, disbelieving she'd really found him, and feeling a little starstruck by his handsomeness.

The man was eye candy. Izzy already caught the college students in the corner glancing his way, even before the novelty of two adults signing had been introduced.

"*Happy to help.*" He looked so carefree, a sensation Izzy hadn't felt since before her pregnancy test sported two little lines. A part of her wanted to wipe that carefree aura off him, his turn to deal with the reality of their one night. Another part of her wanted to let him keep it. After all, it had been her decision to raise their child whether or not she ever found him.

Their child. Words she hadn't thought until now.

Among the usual coffeehouse chatter, giggling hit Izzy's ears. She turned, checking out the sound, finding the college-aged group not only the culprit, but also staring her way. Or rather, Nolan's way. Izzy wanted to grumble. She

was maybe two or three years older than them and it felt like ten.

A tap on the table had her facing Nolan again. *"What's wrong?"* he asked.

She thumbed behind her. *"You have a fan club."*

His eyebrows lowered as he glanced over her shoulder. *"I'm sure they're interested in the ASL, that's all."*

Izzy shook her head, amused despite herself. *"Nope. I caught them staring before I arrived."*

She expected Nolan to look at the group again. Instead those brown eyes studied her. *"You were watching me?"*

She raised her hands but didn't sign. Crap. She had been, and she'd admitted it. Her cheeks heated and she willed them not to. This wasn't a date, not in any sense of either of their imaginations.

It felt like one.

They hadn't been able to chat like this last time, not that either of them wanted to do anything resembling talking. On that thought she really needed to pull this conversation back around. She had a baby to get home to.

She prepared to do just that, rip off the Band-Aid, tell Nolan the real reason she wanted to meet with him, when two shadows hovered over the table. She looked up at the man and woman standing there, as did Nolan.

"We...learn...ASL," the woman signed.

Oh boy. Izzy wanted to hide her face. *Not now, ASL students!* And it occurred to her that that had been the extent of her abilities when she first met Nolan. How did he deal with her newbie signing?

Nolan smiled and gave the pair a thumbs-up. *"Nice to meet you."*

Huh, he had slowed his signs down, and probably had for her, too, that fateful night. And she still hadn't been able to catch his rapid-fire fingerspelling of his name. If she had, they wouldn't need to have this conversation.

"You...deaf?" the man asked.

Izzy forced a smile when she wanted to shoo them away.

Nolan didn't seem to mind. *"Yes, I'm deaf."*

The students turned to her. *"Hearing,"* she signed.

The pair nodded. They didn't appear to have anything else to say, shifting on their feet. This day didn't need any more awkward. *"We're going to talk now,"* she signed, amazing herself that she slowed down her own signs, when she'd been signing for only two years herself. It helped having a Deaf future brother-in-law and knowing she needed to sign if she ever met Nolan again.

The students waved and left, and Izzy tried to collect herself and get back on topic.

"Always nice to see more people learning ASL," Nolan signed, taking a sip of his drink as he did so.

Izzy nodded and then decided, screw it, she needed to jump in with both feet, an Izzy specialty. *"I meant what I said, I tried to find you. I had to find you."*

Those blond eyebrows lowered.

This should be a flirting thing. She should be reaching across the table, brushing his hand. Another time, another place. They were beyond that now, in more ways than one.

"I don't know how to say this." She tried to come up with the words all day, and right about now she wished she'd figured something out.

"Would writing help?" Nolan asked.

Izzy shook her head, ready to kick something. She signed better than those students, dammit! *"No it's not a language thing, it's..."* Her hands flailed, and she needed a few more moments without his gaze on her before she messed things up even further. *"I need a drink. Excuse me."*

And then she scurried away to order a coffee—nerves or not, a latte had become a necessity. As far as impressions went, Izzy once again failed spectacularly.

...

Nolan chuckled as Izzy headed for the counter, amused and intrigued by her behavior. She hadn't been a fan of the interruption, and if Nolan were honest, he could have done without it, too. He meant what he'd said, though. He appreciated more people taking an interest in ASL, because it meant more people he could communicate with.

Izzy's ASL skills had improved greatly. Not fluent, nowhere near fluent, and her grammar was a mix of English and ASL. But she could carry a conversation, and he found himself as intrigued by her personality as he was by her beauty.

Wrong train of thought. Unfortunately, the allure still held.

Izzy returned with a to-go cup in hand. She took a deep breath and blew it out and his curiosity peaked again. *"O.K.. I need to jump in or I'll never do this. I missed your name when we met, and we didn't exchange numbers. I tried to find you but couldn't."* She wrung her hands together.

"I had taken a job out of state." He had hoped their paths would cross again, but the out-of-state job had been an opportunity he couldn't pass up. At least, it had been at the time.

Her eyes darted back and forth between his, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. This wasn't a "what a small world, how ironic we meet again" thing after all.

She lifted her cup, then put it down without drinking. *"That night, you and I...I got pregnant."*

Nolan blinked. Blinked again. But no, those were the words she signed.

He shook his head. It was one night. They had used protection. Though his own existence was proof that protection didn't always work.

"Pregnant?" he asked, in the off chance there was any possible way he'd misunderstood. He studied her, his mind full of questions. Did she have the kid? Did she abort or give it up for adoption? Did she lose it? Whatever happened, he realized with a sinking feeling, she'd had to do it all on her own.

She nodded. *"We have a son. He's nine months old."*

He. Had. A. Son. With the woman he hadn't been able to stop thinking about. Everything he knew had changed in the span of the last two minutes.

Breathe, Holtzman, you've got responsibilities now.

Izzy woke up her phone and set it in front of him. The image of a baby with a few wisps of brown hair and two bottom teeth stared back at him. Could be any kid, with any parent. But the smile...that same smile existed in his own baby pictures.

"What's his name?"

"A-R-C-H-I-E."

His son had a name. He was looking at the boy's face, even. And still, it didn't quite feel real. When he woke this morning, he was a single twenty-five-year-old, living alone, with only his mother for family. Now he had a kid.

He shot his eyes from the baby photo back to Izzy. She'd been a college student when he'd been a recent graduate, so she had to be younger than him, and she'd opted to bring their child into this world and raise him. He was feeling too many things at once—shock, anxiety, uncertainty, and a hell of a lot of respect for the woman sitting across from him.

The mother of his child.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find you," she signed.

"Not your fault." He wanted to reach out and soothe her, tell her everything would be fine, but he didn't know how to be a father. He'd support the kid, that much was a given. He wasn't an asshole like the man who created him. But beyond providing material necessities? He had no father figure. Not a fucking clue how to fill those shoes.

"Father" was a meaningless word to him that could mean sperm donor, and considering Archie's creation, the same could be said about the next generation.

Damn condoms. Virility must run in his genes.

Nolan had been known as the screw-up around here. Part of the reason he left town after that night with Izzy was to

get a job away from where he'd grown up. And now that he was back he had one chance, this new job, to prove he wasn't the kid who evacuated the high school.

Accident. Of course. And not the cool smoking behind the bleachers way or pulling the alarm as a prank. More in the science experiment gone wrong way. The model rocket worked great, in an outdoor area, but inside the gym it turned into target practice with his classmates.

He'd been a freshman, and the event was famous enough that his sign name had been changed—"rocket" with an *N* shape instead of an *R*.

He hadn't grown out of being awkward, either. Case in point, this moment. He sat there, not signing a word, captivated by Izzy's brown eyes. Somehow, even with this bombshell dropped at his feet, she still drew him in. He still wanted her.

The screen turned black and Izzy pulled her phone away. "*I know this is a lot and unexpected. Trust me, I know. If I need a new job or...*" Her hands trailed off. She signed a hell of a lot better now than when they first met, but English was her first language and it showed.

"No. It's fine. We'll work it out."

Izzy nodded. "*I don't need anything from you. I just wanted you to know.*"

Why did that hit him low in his gut, a sucker punch on top of the initial shock of having a kid in the first place? "*I don't know what's right here, but I can pay child support.*"

Something changed, the warmth in Izzy's eyes closed off, a fierceness shone in the set of her jaw. "*Fine.*"

Crap. He didn't know what he did wrong, only that he'd done it again.

Once a screw-up. Always a screw-up.

And now he had a kid.

Chapter Three

Izzy parked in her spot at her future brother-in-law's house, exhausted after a long day at work and an emotionally draining meeting with Nolan. The secret she'd been forced to keep for far too long had been revealed. Relief should be her first feeling. But it wasn't.

Disappointment was.

Her dream of Archie's father falling in love at first sight and scooping him up and never letting him go had faded to dust right there in the coffee shop, and father and son hadn't even met.

For a brief moment Izzy wondered if it would have been better never to have found Nolan at all.

No, scratch that. This was better. Archie would at least know who his father was, even if the man earned the title of birth father. Health concerns, genetics, lineage, all that mattered more than finances.

She'd give Nolan time, he deserved that much, and chalk her unrealistic expectations up to wish fulfillment.

She got out of her car and collected her belongings, ready to enter the house she was fortunate enough to call home. She would have preferred to get a place on her own, but it was either move in with Gaby or go back to her mother's house in Connecticut, where Izzy knew she'd never find her child's father. Or finish college. She wanted to stand on her own two feet, but she had been lucky to graduate on time, and her sister's help was the reason why. This job, she

hoped, would open the door to being independent, and one day she'd get a little two-bedroom apartment for her and Archie.

Not on this income with housing prices in the area, but each step forward was a step in the right direction. And bonus, her sister hadn't set a wedding date yet, so she still had hope of moving out before she infringed on newlyweds.

Her sister had been lucky, finding the right man to share her life with. Levi would be thrilled to start a family. That pesky fantasy wish, of finding Archie's father and having him drop everything to love the child he never knew he had, lingered. Her hopes may have been unrealistic, but tell that to her ever hopeful heart.

One day, maybe, Nolan would come around. Or she'd find a different man to be Archie's father.

And he'd be handsome and wealthy and would love her family more than she did. Because unicorns were real and elections weren't rigged.

Izzy pushed through the front door, more than ready to see her son.

"How'd it go?" Gaby asked as she came into the room. She signed as she spoke, something both of them did most of the time, a habit whether or not Levi was in the room.

Izzy lit up at the baby on Gaby's hip, clapping and reaching and bouncing. She gathered up Archie and held him close, breathing in that baby scent.

"Where's the alcohol?" She mumbled the words, her face still mushed into her son's neck. She tended bar briefly, before her pregnancy had stopped her; she could whip something together to pack a punch.

Gaby took the bag off Izzy's shoulder. "That bad? Do you really want to pump and dump?"

Izzy shifted Archie so she could sign as she spoke. "No. Well, maybe."

Gaby took Archie from Izzy's hands and placed him on the floor with a cloth book. "Okay, baby's occupied. What

happened?”

Izzy shook her head, hoping the tears threatening to fill her eyes stayed at bay. She hadn't realized how much she wanted the fantasy of a happy family until the whole thing went up in smoke. “He offered to pay child support when a kid needs more than a bank account!”

Gaby rubbed Izzy's shoulder, signing with her free hand. “Financial support will be a good thing.”

Izzy sucked in some air. “I know. I know. I need it and you and Levi have been so helpful. But a kid needs a father. Life is so short and he's already lost so much time.”

Gaby's hand continued the slow, soothing pace on Izzy's arm. “The man just found out he's got a kid. You have to give him time to adjust. You sprang the little cutie on him.”

Archie crawled over to Izzy, then used her knees to pull to a standing position, bouncing on his feet as he grinned up at her. Her heart melted, as it always did when she looked at him. “Who can resist this little face?” She picked up her son and held him close.

“I sure can't. Give Nolan time. He might surprise you.”

Izzy wasn't so sure, but she breathed in the baby scent of her son as she absorbed her sister's support. Regardless of Nolan, Archie already had a family, a small but loving one.

They'd make do. Like they always had.

...

Nolan pressed buttons on the controller, thumbed the D-pad, and did his best to beat the crap out of the character his best friend played. Bodhi, with his trick fingers, did a move Nolan had never even seen before, and Nolan's character hit the ground, defeated.

Damn old-school games.

Nolan threw his controller on the couch at the themed bar. The entire room held various video game equipment, ranging from old-school to current, and patrons drank and

played. Nolan's idea of the perfect bar, when Bo didn't decimate him. *"What the fuck was that?"* he signed.

Bo stretched out his fingers. *"Magic."* He glanced around the moderate-sized bar crowd. *"Are we meeting here because you're tired of me picking on you for your half-empty apartment?"*

Nolan shrugged. He needed out of his head, and the distraction of the bar held far more appeal than staying home. Nothing had settled right since Izzy's reveal hours ago. He had a kid. A son. The concept didn't seem real, not yet.

"Because I know you haven't made any changes even without being there. It doesn't look like you live there, know what I mean? At the very least put some of your artwork up on the walls."

Nolan's apartment suited his needs. Sure, it had bare walls and could be an Airbnb for all the personality he put into it. Did he really need to hang up his drawing of a sunset when he lived alone and could see the image on his computer? *"You want to be my decorator?"*

Bo grinned. *"I'm not that kind of queer. Though you need some color; have you heard about anything beyond beige?"*

Nolan narrowed his eyes and glared.

Bo's teasing smile faded at Nolan's inability to tease back. *"What's got you all tied up? Find something new to mess up?"*

Nolan scrubbed a hand down his face. Once a screw-up... The answer was a clear, "Yes."

Bo leaned forward. *"The new job? You worked hard at that place in New York, the blowup wasn't your fault."*

He had a history of starting off good then turning to shit. Case in point: New York and the social media fiasco from hell. *"Not the job."*

Bo waited and Nolan knew he'd wait him out. Always had. They'd met in kindergarten and struck up a fast friendship. Good thing, too, since a small school meant if relationships

went sour, there weren't many options to run to. But Nolan and Bodhi were at each other's sides from day one. Heck, Bodhi tried his best to run interference when the rocket went out of control, and still had the scar on his hand from the noble attempt.

Therefore Nolan didn't try to hide. Bo knew all his mess-ups and hadn't judged a single one. He leaned forward, grabbing his beer and taking a swig. *"Remember that woman, the ASL student?"*

"The one you obsessed over?"

"I don't obsess!"

Bo rocked his hand from side to side. *"You obsess."*

Nolan narrowed his eyes.

Bo leaned back, sipping his own drink, waiting Nolan out.

"I found her."

Bo leaned forward, drink forgotten, not needing any explanation for the sudden subject shift. *"Really? Why aren't you happy?"*

"She had a kid." He focused on the neon bar light above Bo's head. *"My kid."*

Bo's eyebrows reached for the lock of dark hair that always flopped over his forehead. *"What?"*

"I have a son. Nine months old. Named A-R-C-H-I-E." The words didn't seem real. He conjured up the image on Izzy's phone, of the smiling baby, and struggled to feel something. That kid could be any other picture of a kid. He tried to mesh it into his reality, make it click and settle. Maybe in time it would.

Bo didn't lower his brows. *"Are you sure? I don't want to be a prick, but you don't know this woman; she could be lying."*

"Right, because anyone would want me to be a father." Nolan shook his head. *"No, I trust her."* He had no reason to question Izzy, not when the timing lined up, not when the kid could blend in with his own baby pictures.

Bo ran his hands through his hair. *"Wow. You have a kid. I*

told you skipping that day of health class would have repercussions."

Nolan growled, the vibrations in his throat an involuntary necessity. Bonus because Bo had a cochlear implant and Nolan had often been accused of being loud.

He hadn't a clue what sound level the bar had, but when Bo cupped his ear, he figured the bastard heard him. *"I can't hear you."*

Nolan flipped him off.

Bo wiped the air. *"O.K., you have a kid. What are you going to do about it?"*

Nolan fisted his hair. The million-dollar question. *"No clue. Izzy has it under control. I'll mess things up."*

Bo chucked a controller at him; it rammed into his shoulder with enough force to leave a bruise. *"Don't be stupid. Yes, you will mess things up. All parents mess up. But you know damn well the hole a missing father leaves behind. Don't be that hole."*

Nolan rubbed his chest, and the ache there, even though the offending object had hit his shoulder. *"I don't know the first thing about being a father."*

"Not the kid's fault." Bo picked up the controller and loaded a new game. Nolan joined in, enjoying being out of the spotlight for a while. It wasn't Archie's fault he was a screw-up who still played video games and lived in the equivalent of a sparsely decorated college dorm.

The fault belonged to Nolan and not learning from his own conception. He had to figure out if he could be something more, or if history had already provided the answer.

Chapter Four

The following day Nolan sat at his desk, doodling a tree with falling leaves in the corner of his notepad, debating with himself as though the winner got a monetary prize, or a trip to Disney World, or Land, or Paris, he wasn't picky.

No, definitely not Paris. He didn't need any further complications to his love life, or former love life—the reason for the internal debate.

He needed to get Izzy on all the social media accounts in order for them to double-team and ensure fast and efficient responses. He learned his lesson at his last job, but requesting her help meant seeing her. He needed to find some way to step up, to figure out what she needed from him for the baby. All night he'd tossed and turned, not coming up with any answers.

He tossed his pen on his desk and leaned back in his wobbly office chair. Comfortable enough, but a few years past prime and in danger of falling over if he leaned too far. After nearly two years of hoping to find Izzy again, he now delayed any interaction. Because it was one thing to think of the hot, sexy ASL student who had rocked his world for a single night, and quite another to look at her and feel all the guilt for the surprise he'd left with her, and the responsibilities he'd slammed into her. All because the condom's power level failed.

Could condoms be doubled up? Would that help? He'd have to look into that.

But for now he stood and pushed back his wobbly chair, determined to stop being a wuss and get on with this. Izzy was here. He'd have to interact with her for work, and he sure as hell needed to do something about her kid. Their kid. It still sent his head into a spin.

He needed a few more days to figure things out. With any luck, she'd grant him the small reprieve and wouldn't hold it against him.

Nolan made his way to the assistant/intern area. He rounded the corner and the four desks loomed ahead of him, two occupied. The hearing intern, Lisa, sat at one, blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail. She waved in her overenthusiastic ponytail-swaying way and he gave her a halfhearted response, ignoring how her swishing hair stilled as he headed straight to the person he wanted to see, as though a magnet pulled him there and not a simple business conversation.

Izzy glanced up, smiled, and for a moment he faltered, forgetting the reason why he came out here in the first place. Similar to when he'd seen her at the bar and any excuse he had about the number of beers he'd consumed flew out the window at a high enough speed to create a cyclone.

"What's up?" she signed, the motion enough to snap him out of his stupor.

"I wanted to get you set up on our social media accounts." He'd already explained the specifics, just hadn't gotten her up and running.

She nodded and rolled her chair away from her desk. He leaned over, opening her browser and plugging in the information. He made sure Izzy knew the passwords for when the browser reset, and did his best to ignore the subtle fragrance of her, and how it drifted to him and wrapped around him as he typed.

When finished, he stood and made sure to leave her personal bubble, escaping her alluring smell and how easy it

would be to push his nose to her neck and breathe her in. Dangerous territory, and not at all appropriate for the office.

"Do you want me to notify you if anything pops up? Or give you a chance to respond first?"

He shook his head, using the motion as a chance to clear the lust sizzling in his brain. He was half hard just standing there, breathing her scent. He needed a cold drink, or a shower, or to dunk his head in the sink. *"No, if you know the answer, jump right in. I want to establish fast responses, to prove we're reliable."*

Izzy nodded and scooted her chair back to her desk. Nolan stepped away. Izzy showed no signs of being affected like he was. Good. She'd been on the receiving end of his mistakes; she should be careful. He needed to come with a warning label—seven years' bad luck, no mirror breakage required. That thought was enough to kick him in the gut. He headed back to his office, determined to focus on work and nothing else.

...

At lunch Izzy grabbed her bag, realizing she still needed to establish some place to pump. The previous day the office had been busy, so she'd camped out in her car with her nursing cover. That would do in a pinch, but she really needed a designated spot. She'd been pumping for months at home, first as a way to increase her production, then building up her milk supply in preparation for work or anytime she needed to be away from Archie. She had enough that he'd be fine if she didn't pump. But her tender breasts were full and painful. Besides making more for Archie, she needed the release before she leaked or the pain increased.

She walked past Nolan's office, determined to not check to see if he was inside. They'd been dancing around each other since the coffee shop meeting and as far as she was

concerned, the ball was in his court. Sure, she dropped a twenty-pound bombshell on him, but as far as bombshells went, it was a damn cute one. So she'd give him time. He deserved this much. In a few days she'd ask if he wanted to meet Archie; maybe seeing the kid in person would make a difference.

She passed his closed door and headed to Deanna's open one, relieved to find her still inside. Izzy waved.

Deanna looked up. *"How's it going?"*

"Good." Izzy glanced around nervously, unsure how this conversation would go, and caught the pictures behind Deanna's desk, family pictures displaying two children. *"Can we talk for a minute?"*

Deanna nodded and gestured to the chairs in front of her desk. Izzy shifted the door to an almost closed position and took a seat, settling the bag between her legs. *"I have a son, he's nine months old."*

Deanna smiled. *"What a cute age. I miss my kids being that small."*

"I breastfeed and..." Her hands trailed off, unsure how to sign what she needed. She didn't talk about this kind of stuff with Levi or anyone else Deaf, so she never needed the signs.

"You need a place to pump." Izzy figured out the sign based on context and Deanna mouthing the word. The woman's gaze floated around, in thinking mode. *"I'll talk with our maintenance guy. We don't have any empty office spaces, but we do have some storage that could double as a tiny office, would that work?"*

Relief flooded Izzy. *"Yes. Thank you. I wasn't sure how this would go."*

Deanna waved her off. *"We're relaxed here, as I'm sure you've seen, and understand people have a life outside of this job. My kids are teenagers now."*

Izzy glanced at the picture again, showing Deanna, another woman, and a girl and boy. *"I thought so from your*

picture." She pointed.

Deanna picked it up. *"That's from a few years ago; both kids are taller than me now."* She laughed. *"My wife gave birth, and I remember the breastfeeding and pumping days. I'm about to go pick up lunch if you need my office until we can get you set up?"*

Izzy glanced around, noting only one window with off-white vertical blinds covering them, like all the window coverings at the agency. *"Yes, I would appreciate that."*

Deanna rose. *"No problem."* She patted Izzy on the shoulder and left, closing the door behind her.

Pressure hit the tips of Izzy's nipples, bordering on painful, and she couldn't wait to get everything set up. She unpacked her pumping supplies, including the handy little contraption that allowed for hands-free pumping. Once everything was set, she turned on the machine, the milk let-down easing the growing aches.

People her age dealt with hangovers, and yet here she sat in an office with milk spilling out of her. Her life had taken a very different path, and while she loved her son, she could go for some form of beverage exchange that didn't involve her nipples.

Milk filled the containers attached to the pump, more so than she usually got when she pumped around Archie's normal feeding. She picked up her phone, scrolled through a few of his recent images, milk flowing even faster as her heart warmed at the little face.

She missed him. Badly. She needed to be a working parent and would want to be, regardless of the situation. She didn't go through four years of college just to stay home. She wanted a career and a life. Partly due to seeing her mother reassert herself in the working world when her father died, and the struggles she had establishing a career later in life. Izzy had every intention of having a career and a family, she just happened to get the kid first.

In need of her baby fix, she called her sister. "How's my

son?" she asked the minute the call connected.

Gaby laughed. "Well hello to you, too. He's fine, curled up on my lap, almost asleep. Switch to video."

Izzy did, and Archie's little face came on the screen, a punch of warmth to her soul. "Hi, baby, how are you?"

Archie grinned, showing off his two teeth, and clapped.

"Now I won't get him to fall asleep. Thanks a lot, Mom," Gaby said, the teasing clear in the light way she spoke.

"Oh, hush and talk to me when you have kids and leave them behind." She switched her attention to Archie. "Your aunt does not understand."

"Maybe I'll stay at home."

Izzy wished Gaby was on-screen so she could see her sister. "What?"

The phone shifted so both Gaby and Archie were in the shot. "I said maybe I'll stay at home. Levi makes enough, I could work from home or reduce my hours. I don't know. But we're thinking a few years from now. No offense, but I want to get married first."

Izzy stuck out her tongue as the door clicked open and a hand reached in to flash the light. *Shit*. "Got to go," she whispered to the phone before disconnecting. Odds were the person on the other side was Deaf, otherwise they would have heard this wasn't Deanna. Izzy reached down and quickly snatched up her nursing cover that she'd kept in the bag, just in case, laying it across her chest a second before the intruder appeared.

Nolan blinked at her and stumbled backward, knocking into a corkboard filled with papers and memos. The board shifted and Izzy cringed as it crashed to the floor. Nolan spun around, finding the board on the floor, with papers strewn about. He faced her. "*Sorry.*"

This did not bode well for her continuing to pump. She waved before he took care of the fallen board. "*Close the door, please.*" She had to sign far out from her body, otherwise she risked disconnecting one of the pumps, and

she was not in the mood for spilled milk today.

Nolan closed the door, then faced her. *"What are you doing?"*

Izzy figured, what the hell, he'd already seen her naked and lifted the covering to reveal the containers. *"Milk. For your kid."*

Yeah, she was snarky. Nothing like being interrupted while pumping by the same person who got her pregnant in the first place.

Nolan shifted, scratching his neck. *"I'm sorry. I'll clean this up."*

"I can't really help at the moment."

"No, of course not, you're busy and..." He stopped signing, not finishing his statement. She didn't know if he was uncomfortable with the whole "breasts make milk" thing or about knocking the board off the wall. Or both. His cheeks were pink, and it took some of her snark away, since the man was cute, cuter when thrown off-balance.

She watched as he bent, following the curve of his ass, nothing else to do at the moment. He straightened, hanging the board up, the dress shirt tugging across his broad shoulders. Izzy looked away. She shouldn't still be interested in the man, not while pumping, not when their jobs meant they interacted for work and their kid, nothing more. But Nolan bent again, picking up the papers, and Izzy continued watching, enjoying the view more than she should. Only this time, he turned before she could look away.

She hadn't realized she could get more awkward while pumping, but clearly she could.

"You O.K.?" His lips curved—he'd caught her—but she thanked her lucky stars he didn't call her on it.

"Nothing to do at the moment."

He tacked a few more papers up. *"Let Deanna know this is my fault."* He picked up the final two pieces. *"You do this often?"* He gestured to her chest, where milk still collected.

"If I stop I won't have enough for Archie."

Nolan finished putting the papers back. *"How... How is the baby?"*

"Good."

"You miss him?"

"Always."

Nolan nodded, as though trying to understand, and she appreciated the attempt. *"I know I need to discuss this more with you. I need a little time, to figure this out. Can you give me that?"*

Izzy had hoped for no time needed at all, but she'd give him the time he'd asked for. She imagined he would have needed time, even if she'd found him before Archie had been born. *"I can give you that."*

"Thanks." He glanced around, for what she didn't know. An awkwardness hung between them and she bet it had only 10 percent to do with the fact she pumped milk. More likely had to do with the why. *"Do you need anything?"*

Izzy paused, touched by the thought when she expected him to leave. *"I'm hungry. Forgot to grab my lunch."*

"That's why I came here. I was going to the corner pizza place, didn't know if anyone else wanted something."

Izzy thought of the salad she brought for lunch, with sudden distaste. *"Can you get me a meatball sub?"*

Nolan nodded.

"I can pay you later—"

He waved her off. *"All things considered, I can handle this. Especially since you are making food."*

A smile warmed her face. *"Milk, but yeah."*

He shifted his feet, as though he wanted to ask her more questions, then nodded and left, closing the door securely behind him.

Izzy checked on the milk and the steady flow still filling the cups. She didn't know what to make of the situation, but at least he got a little insight into her world and the things she did for their kid. Small pieces of information to help toward whatever decision he'd end up making. And in the

meantime, she'd appreciate the offer for lunch and hope his kind gestures grew into being more hands-on with his son.

Chapter Five

Two days later Nolan hadn't figured out what to do about the kid. Izzy agreed to give him time, but each passing hour weighed heavily on him, and he knew he needed to do something soon. The kid resembled the powerful computer character that could unlock worlds and opportunities, but he didn't have a clue how to unlock him. Each time he saw Izzy, he thought of the baby they had somehow created. When she took a break to pump milk in the small closet space they had reorganized for her. When she glanced at her phone and had a special smile on her face. Babies, and women with babies, hadn't been a part of his life before this, and he had many questions, and a lot of curiosity, but he didn't dare ask. Not yet, at least. He still needed to figure out child support and that can of worms, and if them having a kid together created any problems for a workplace with a no-dating clause. Not that they were dating, but clearly they'd done something in the past to create a child.

He picked up his phone, opened his text thread to his mother, staring at the blinking cursor. Same thing he'd been doing for three days now. He needed to tell her and, once he did, he'd get her advice, some help on adjusting to this life-changing information. She wanted grandchildren, but not in this way. She wanted better for him, better for the next generation. How many conversations had they had about safe sex, about being responsible? Tons. And he'd failed, just like the man who created him. He hated knowing he had a

connection besides half his genetic makeup.

Nolan pushed thoughts of Izzy and Archie out of his mind. He had a meeting to focus on. An important one. The first board meeting since he started his job. It was his big chance to prove himself, and he had only two weeks to prepare. He lived one mistake away from being the screw-up again. One meeting, one chance. He couldn't afford to blow it.

Distracted thoughts had no place. He needed to compartmentalize his life. Focus on the meeting while at work, figure out what to do about having a son after. The word still felt awkward and hollow. A son should have been someone he anticipated, waited to be born, held from that very first day. Not the smiling nine-month-old he'd seen only in a picture.

A son should be wanted by both parents, should have a father who knew the first thing about paternal love.

Nolan shook his head. *Wrong path, don't go there.* He could be all of that as soon as he got his head on straight.

Izzy bustled into his office, sending his heart racing. She set a stack of papers down on his desk before brushing back her long hair. He had the urge to run his fingers through the dark wavy strands and—

The light by his voice phone flashed, and Izzy reached over and picked it up, lips moving in what he assumed was a formal greeting. She held the phone between her ear and shoulder. "*Paper, pen.*" He rummaged around his desk then handed over a yellow lined pad and pen. Izzy settled her hip against the desk, scribbling as she wrote. Her curvy penmanship had started to become familiar to him, a comfort almost. Even though they hadn't interacted much beyond business, he'd still been able to get little hints into who this woman was, and each little nibble left him wanting more. Like how she'd tuck her hair behind her ear, revealing three small hoops. Why three? And had her hair bothered her or was it a subconscious act?

Shanice appeared at his door as Izzy hung up. "*A woman*

named Gaby is here for you." Nolan had no clue who this was, but Izzy hopped off his desk and hurried out of his office, following Shanice, leaving him alone and confused. He glanced at the paper, but her scribbles were a word here and there. The message seemed to be something related to Google, but that made no sense for a phone call, and he didn't have enough information to decipher the rest.

With nothing else to do and idle curiosity taking over, he headed down to the front desk. Shanice had returned to her station. Izzy stood talking, not signing, to another woman, who held a baby who looked a lot like the image on Izzy's phone.

Nolan froze at the sight of his son, there, in person, before him. Archie swung his head in Nolan's direction, smile widening, drool sliding down his chin. His arms and feet flailed and it took everything in Nolan not to turn and look behind him. Surely a clown or train or whatever little babies liked stood behind him. No way could this kid want to see him.

But you're his father. Regardless of that fact, Archie didn't know him. The thought caused his heart to twist. This little boy held half his DNA and didn't know him at all. History repeating itself in ways he never expected.

He swallowed, decision made. He'd find some way to be part of this kid's life. Because Bodhi was right, and he refused to become his father.

The women played pass the potato with the baby, and the next thing he knew Archie had been settled against Izzy's hip and a large bag with tiny dinosaurs on it had been shifted to her shoulder. The other woman waved and backed out.

Izzy turned and found him standing there like a lurker. Her eyes widened and he didn't miss that she shifted Archie closer to her. Not the meeting either of them had anticipated. *"My sister. She's got a last minute meeting she had to go in for."*

She headed deeper into the agency, leaving Nolan to follow after. The kid watched him, and Nolan registered nothing of their surroundings, only this little being clutching his mother's shoulder. Until they arrived in his office and Izzy set the baby on the floor, with the bag open for him to rummage through. She moved to Nolan's desk and grabbed the yellow notepad, but he couldn't take his eyes off the kid pulling out clothes and wipes and toys and strewing them across the floor.

Izzy turned, following Nolan's gaze. *"He's fine. Do we have a Google business listing?"*

Nolan scratched his head. Did they? He opened up his browser. *"I don't know."*

"Someone called, saying we needed to update it."

Nolan paused with his hands on the keyboard. *"Update a nonprofit that doesn't sell goods?"* He clicked to the page, finding all their details to be accurate.

Izzy leaned over his shoulder and he tried not to notice how close she was, how her breath nearly grazed his neck and how near her breasts were to his arm. He failed. In a wayward attempt at distraction, he glanced at the baby continuing to pull out items like a clown act, and any hardness in his pants went soft.

He could kiss the kid, instant control switch activated.

Izzy stepped away. *"Looks fine."* She bit her lip and all of his control flipped on a dime, as though she had super powers that even a baby couldn't deter. *"Did I fall for a scam?"*

A smile forced Nolan's lips to turn upward, even as he tried to keep it tame. *"I suspect so."*

Izzy's lips moved in what he thought to be a swear. *"Sorry about that."* She cringed, then turned to his door, and her mouth moved. *"Shanice needs backup for a few minutes."* She glanced at Archie, then back at him. *"He should be fine, but can you watch him for a minute?"*

He nodded, kicking himself for not manning up and

discussing something, anything, related to him being this kid's father. Izzy hesitated, looking at Archie once more, before leaving the room.

Nolan and Archie watched her leave and he half expected the kid to get up and follow his mother. Or burst into tears. Neither happened. Archie resumed banging the bag around, and with the clutter all over the floor Nolan doubted anything remained inside.

Then Archie's lower lip trembled and Nolan almost ran down the hall to get Izzy. Father or not, he had no clue what to do with a baby, especially this baby. Archie shoved a hand out, making a fist, eyes growing watery, and pure panic gripped Nolan by the balls.

A vasectomy was definitely in his future.

Archie flailed his hands, making double fists now, and something clicked inside Nolan's thick skull. He got out from behind his desk and squatted in front of the baby. "*Milk, you want milk?*" he asked, signs slow and clear, recognizing the clenching movements as potential baby sign-babbling for milk.

The tears stopped threatening to spill, and Archie flailed his arms, smile now on his chubby little face. Milk. The kid was thirsty. And he'd just communicated with his nine-month-old son.

His. Strange.

Nolan crawled over a pair of baby pants and a stuffed dragon, and found a capped milk bottle still in the bag. He paused, hoping breast milk wasn't anything like soda after being banged around, haunting flashbacks to his rocket mishap springing to mind. Before the thought could take root, little hands landed on his knee, Archie rocking forward, reaching for the milk.

Not knowing what to do, Nolan handed it over. Archie tried to put the bottom in his mouth, then his entire face crumpled when it didn't work. Nolan bit his lip, determined not to laugh at a baby trying to figure out life. Heck, he

didn't have it much better at twenty-five. He took the bottle and opened it, praying nothing else needed to be done.

By now Archie had practically fallen into his lap. Nolan shifted the baby and held the bottle out the correct way. Little hands wrapped around the bottle, trapping one of Nolan's fingers in place, as the tiny lips and throat worked at the milk.

Archie calmed down, and snuggled into Nolan's embrace, and something tightened and loosened deep inside of him. The baby smelled clean and fresh and...baby related. Nolan had the sudden urge to kiss the top of his head, where a few light strands of brown hair sprouted.

He didn't, of course, but the temptation welled deep inside, similar to when he looked at Izzy. His life was out of control. He'd only ever really had his mother as a blood family member, and yet this kid in his lap shared his blood.

And Izzy's eyes.

At that thought, Izzy appeared at the door and halted at the sight. Anyone would have. He sat on the floor, surrounded by toys and clothes and other baby belongings, with a baby in his lap, and a bottle being held by them both.

"He was hungry," Nolan signed with the hand not currently held captive by Archie.

Izzy nodded and took a tentative step in, as though one wrong move would scare him.

"You're teaching him ASL." It wasn't a question.

A small upward tilt graced her lips. *"His father's deaf. And so is my sister's fiancé."*

That was news to him. *"Who?"*

Now Izzy smiled. *"Levi Miller. He teaches Deaf Studies at the university."*

The name sounded familiar, but he wasn't sure if their paths had crossed.

Izzy settled on the floor and held out her arms. Nolan transferred Archie, having to wiggle his finger out of the kid's grasp. A sudden sense of loss hit him when the warm

weight vanished.

Archie's eyes were round as he continued to drink, following Nolan as he stood and wiped his pants. He headed for his desk to get back to work, even though he wanted to return to the floor and see if Archie would grab his finger again.

...

Izzy clutched Archie close, mind reeling from the image she walked in on: father and son bonding. She shouldn't have taken Archie back, but she didn't know what to do. The view had been so domestic that a possessiveness she hadn't yet experienced reared its head. With Gaby or Levi, or even her mother, she still was the main parent, the sole parent. And now the only other person who held that claim had a bonding moment with her son. As much as she wanted to keep that sole parental control, she couldn't ignore the stab of hurt with how quickly Nolan got up and moved away.

Maybe she didn't really know what she wanted.

Baby steps, in some cases literally. She wouldn't force Archie on Nolan, but a little bit of hope sprouted that maybe, just maybe, the two would have a relationship. And she'd find a way to deal.

Her eyes followed Nolan as he sat at his desk and scratched his chin. His blond hair meant the stubble wasn't visible, but she caught it earlier, a light dusting on his jaw. The man probably skipped shaving that morning, and her fingers itched to feel the roughness against her skin.

He glanced up while she still traced his jaw with her gaze, and she stared into his brown eyes, caught. She hugged Archie a little closer, fighting the weird conflict of comfort and arousal. Granted, she hadn't gotten laid since the night that created Archie, so she was clearly overdue by a long shot.

Nolan rose and returned to where she sat, folding his legs

under him on the floor. She noticed that he didn't bring any paperwork with him. He'd been keeping things professional, with little time for anything else, but there they sat, almost like the family they really were.

He didn't sign anything, just joined her, and tears pricked at her eyes until she blinked them away. How many times had she wished someone had been there as support when she was awake in the middle of the night, nodding off to sleep, while Archie nursed? How many times had she needed support and didn't dare ask Gaby or Levi for more than they already gave? So many times.

His gaze dipped to her lips and she involuntarily sucked her bottom one. Then those deep eyes were back on hers and if it wasn't for the baby in her arms, she might've done something foolish, like crawl across the floor and mesh her mouth to Nolan's.

The bottle pushed out of her hand and the spell broke. Izzy shifted Archie on her lap, the baby clapping and gurgling, and before she could react or remember to warn Nolan about the slight reflux problem their kid had, Archie spit up half the milk onto Nolan's trousers.

...

Nolan blinked down at the warm regurgitated milk seeping through his khakis. Did that much milk exist in the bottle originally?

Izzy shifted Archie and grabbed a rag the baby had left on the floor. She swiped at the kid's mouth—how was he still smiling?—before handing it over to Nolan.

"I'm so sorry. That happens sometimes."

Nolan wanted to be mad, this milk didn't smell too hot, but the look on Izzy's face meant this was something she was used to. Which meant this had happened before, probably to her.

"Add V-I-N-E-G-A-R to your wash if it smells."

Yup, she was used to this. He sucked it up and dabbed at the milk, not knowing how much it would really help.

Archie crawled over and plucked the rag from Nolan's hands. Crawled. He hadn't noticed the kid crawl before but Izzy hadn't reacted. His kid could crawl. And spit up milk with alarming aim. Big smile on his face, Archie shoved the rag filled with regurgitated milk into his mouth.

Ew.

Archie paused and turned to Izzy, whose mouth had been moving. She snatched the rag from Archie and popped a pacifier into his milk regurgitation hole. Archie accepted it and sat, staring up at Nolan with those big Izzy eyes.

Nolan needed to get out of there. Out of his office that now held multiple baby items, a baby, and a whole domestic setup that he had not been prepared for. He stood and motioned to his pants. *"I'm going to go clean up."* Then he left the room, left Izzy and Archie and everything else behind.

He needed another day to let this new reality settle, to adjust to the real-life concept of seeing his son. Then he'd talk with Izzy, see what she needed, and step up.

And on his way home he'd pick up some vinegar to clean his pants.

Chapter Six

Izzy sat on her sister's bed, fighting off a wave of panic as Gaby pulled another colorful shirt from her closet. "Please don't go," Izzy begged, not caring one bit that she acted like a spoiled brat and not someone's mother.

"You know I have to go. Big birthday celebration with Levi's family," Gaby signed and spoke. "They've got way too many people born the same month."

Izzy turned her attention to the room, needing a distraction from the mounting fears that she couldn't possibly do this parenting thing on her own. Dark wood furniture occupied much of the space, bold and masculine and very much from before Gaby had moved in. Her sister had added her own touches with a new multicolored bedspread, pillows, and accent pieces, filling the room with color she'd seen Levi refer to as "that Gaby touch," proving how much he loved her sister.

"I'm scared," she said softly, no signs, half hoping her sister didn't hear her.

No such luck. The bed dipped beside her and she ended up engulfed in Gaby's arms. "You've got this. It's only a week. You've done weekends before."

Izzy nodded into Gaby's shoulder. "But I haven't found anyone trustworthy to watch Archie. I'll have to ask to bring him with me or get time off from work, and I just started."

Gaby pulled back and rubbed her shoulder. "Have Nolan help."

"He's got two weeks on me, he doesn't have time, either."

Gaby shook her head and returned to her closet. "I mean, you can figure it out together. Archie is his son."

Izzy ignored that comment. Giving Nolan time meant not springing childcare issues on him before he was ready. "I know you two are thinking of getting married in Maine, and I know I said I'd move out before you did, but I'm not sure that's going to happen." Izzy really did want to move out before her sister got married, give the newlyweds their privacy and space. But even with her new job she didn't know when or how she'd be able to afford living on her own.

Gaby tossed a shirt on the bed and joined her sister. "You know you are welcome here as long as you want."

Izzy nodded, but renewed determination lit her spine. She'd figure something out. She always had.

Movement by the door caused her to look up. Levi stood there, eyebrows lowered, studying them. "*Everything O.K.?*" he signed.

Gaby stood. "*We're fine.*"

"*We have a small problem.*"

Izzy didn't miss that Levi had his gaze on her more than Gaby. "*What's wrong?*"

"*The kitchen upgrade I promised Gaby had a cancellation and can start next week.*" He scrunched his face. "*Fine for Gaby and me, since we'll be in Maine, but...*"

Izzy sighed. "*You're leaving me here alone with a baby and no kitchen.*"

Levi cringed. "*Sorry.*"

"*Maybe we need to stay and help out. We can't leave Izzy alone without a kitchen,*" Gaby said.

Izzy waved them both off. She was a fighter, it wasn't that long ago that she made her meals with a dorm-sized fridge and microwave. "*I'll figure something out. As long as your freezer stays plugged in with all my breastmilk in it.*" Crying over spilled milk was one thing, crying over destroyed frozen milk called for a toddler-sized meltdown.

"I'll make a note of that and tell the contractors."

"Are you sure? I don't want to make things more difficult for you." Gaby should be happy about her kitchen, not worried over Izzy.

Izzy pulled her sister into a hug. *"You already do so much for me. I'll survive. I always have."* She wasn't sure how, but she could switch to store-bought food for Archie for a week and do takeout.

"O.K. then. I'm getting my kitchen upgrade." Gaby did a little happy dance before wrapping her arms around her fiancé, kissing him deeply. They were perfect for each other, so completely in love, and Izzy didn't know if she'd ever have that. At least in a romantic sense. She loved Archie to the moon and back, but relationships were exponentially harder now that he was involved.

Izzy slipped out of the room, heading back to hers to check on her sleeping baby. He lay on his back, one hand over his head as he often did. Love sprouted inside her, and she'd always cherish that. Sure, she wanted more, but she had him, and she'd make that enough.

Then he farted and broke the spell.

...

A week had passed since Nolan met Izzy again, a week since he'd learned he had a son. Too long, he knew it, but necessary to let this new reality settle into place. The whole situation felt new and unsteady, but he was done being a coward. Today was the day. He'd talk to Izzy, maybe at the coffee shop again, and figure out what she needed. Money, childcare, support, he didn't know the first thing about babies and kids and what it all would entail. Didn't matter. She'd done it all on her own until now, the least he could do was try.

Until then, he had work to do and a project he had to get up and running. A whole series of vlogs for the website to

usher the agency into the current level of virtual accessibility. ASL was a visual language, and not all of the community read written English with ease. The agency served the community and the community needed their online information to be in a visual, three-dimensional form that made it accessible. Nolan needed to get the videos filmed and edited, plus add in captions and voice-overs to include all communication styles. The first of which would be debuted at the upcoming board meeting. For the life of him he didn't know why it took this long for his job to be created. Funding in nonprofits was often a struggle, and the less computer-savvy staff did the best they could with the time they had. Now that he was here, he'd be able to help them better reach the community and showcase the services they provided.

He checked back over the social media accounts, his overactive brain juggling multitasking like a champ. The first two accounts had been quiet, and he clicked over to the third. A few inquiries had come in while he'd been out to lunch and he checked them over. He stopped short at Izzy's response to a workshop, with the wrong date and time.

A horrible flashback to his previous job played in technicolor in his mind; he knew far too well how one tiny mistake could snowball into a colossal error of epic proportions. The issues weren't the same, not even close, but for a fleeting moment he'd lost control, again.

Nolan quickly posted an update, and included a link to the calendar for more details. A few minutes later a "thank you" popped up, and he relaxed. Crisis avoided. He scanned over the rest, mind now focused on the task at hand, noting no other mix-ups. Good.

Mistakes happened. A simple double check usually prevented them. He didn't want to be that supervisor who got on his coworkers' case for every little thing, but the social media rested on his shoulders, and he didn't need anyone's help messing things up.

He left his desk and headed toward the central area where Izzy worked, his past as a screw-up breathing down his neck. *Not her fault*, he reminded himself and tried to stay calm. A light talk could settle most things. Would settle this. No need to go in with guns blazing like in an action-packed fighting game. This was more of the lighthearted puzzle sort. Pep talk solidified, he rounded the corner and stopped short at the sight she created: her hair hung in a messy ponytail, dark circles swirled under her eyes, and her face read "Caution, trespassers get shot." Probably why no one else sat in the area.

She pulled her phone from her ear, stabbing at it with her finger, a scowl on her face that he didn't think had anything to do with his presence.

He approached slowly, having never seen her like this. Screw fighting game or light puzzle, this was the interpersonal relationships game, and one wrong move would cause the whole thing to implode.

Before he could sign or gain her attention, her hands moved. *"Yes, I know I had the wrong date, I saw your update. I'm sorry, I had two events mixed up."* She met his eyes, steel lining them, but he caught the vulnerability shining through. Something was wrong. And out of the million and one things that could have Izzy messing up, he narrowed in on one single thought and couldn't let go.

"The baby O.K.?" A strange and new panic bubbled up inside him, even though rationality said she wouldn't be here if Archie were hurt.

A tight smile crossed her face. *"Archie is fine."* She used a simple name sign for the boy, a shaking A. Nolan didn't know if it was something she'd set up with her sister's Deaf fiancé or a placeholder. Either way, it thankfully wasn't a rocket.

Izzy leaned back and shook out her hands. *"My sister and Levi are going on vacation next week, and I can't find childcare I trust. I just spoke with one and even if they had*

availability, I can't afford it. I'm going to need to take the week off or something." Her hands fumbled. *"I know, I haven't been here long but...my son comes first."*

Her son. He didn't know why that crawled under his skin and itched like a motherfucker. *Her son.* He didn't have a leg to stand on; all he'd done was provide half the genetics.

But there sat Izzy, frazzled beyond anything he'd seen before as she tried to juggle her job and *their* son. He'd wanted to talk after work, but the opportunity sat there in front of him, tingled on the tips of his fingers. Izzy needed him. His son needed him, and he'd be damned if he let more precious time fade away. Regardless of his position in their lives, this wasn't on her shoulders. Not alone. Not anymore. *"Bring him here. He can stay in my office."*

Her eyes grew wide. *"Here?"*

"Yes, here. I'll talk with Deanna." He'd seen Madisyn at the front desk often enough, surely a baby wouldn't be that much of a problem.

"And what? Sleep? He's nine months old, he's active and going to need attention."

Nolan hadn't had a clue, but he refused to back down. *"We can figure it out together."*

Izzy's gaze traveled the perimeter, and Nolan followed it, finding no one else there, just the two of them. *"And that isn't a problem for our jobs?"*

He scratched his head. The no-dating policy made no mention of past relationships, or past interpersonal connections. Treading carefully would be best for both of them, but as long as they didn't start dating again, he'd make sure it wasn't a problem. *"No one else has to know. You're working mostly with me; it makes sense for me to help."* It made sense because he was the one responsible for the kid and he hated himself for letting the job be his buffer. *"Please, let me help. I'll talk with Deanna."*

"No, that wouldn't make sense. I'll talk with her." Her shoulders didn't relax and his intuition claimed it didn't

have anything to do with Deanna. Challenge not complete.

"What else is wrong?"

She froze, her shoulders tightening. *"I've never been alone with him for a week. I'm used to having Gaby and Levi for support. And, as if that isn't enough, the kitchen is being upgraded so I'm going to be largely without a kitchen and dealing with who knows what sounds while a hearing baby is trying to sleep."*

In a moment of disconnect from his brain to anything resembling rational thought, Nolan signed, *"So come live with me for the week."*

Chapter Seven

Izzy's jaw slipped open as she tried to come up with any other possible meaning for Nolan's signs. He couldn't possibly have meant what she thought he meant. "*What?*"

Nolan scratched his neck, shifting the collar with one button undone, and glanced around, but the other desks were empty at this hour of the day. She expected him to back down and change his mind. Yet when his eyes met hers, he held firm. "*Stay with me for the week. We'll care for Archie together. I've got the presentation at the board meeting to prepare for and I need your help. And the baby is partly my responsibility.*"

Izzy blinked. And blinked again. Nope, not an illusion. This wasn't a dream or daydream or hallucination of her unyielding hope. Even though she didn't catch all the signs, not yet, she knew she caught the meaning. Hell of a time for Nolan to step up to the plate. "*But you don't want kids.*"

Nolan dropped his head and she half expected him to walk off. But then he faced her, shoulders squared. "*I never planned on having kids, no. But we've got one. I don't know what is needed from me, what helps you and Archie the most, but I can help.*"

It wasn't a grand proclamation of long-term involvement in his son's life. But Izzy had never depended on that. She decided to bring Archie into this world, and keep him, on her own. Which meant she accepted the full and sole responsibility, even if she had to depend on her family to

finish college and stay afloat. This offer was more than she had banked on, and she'd do well to accept it.

After all, Izzy had the nine months she'd been pregnant to make up her own mind. She could give Nolan at least that long to figure out his.

"O.K.," she signed. Then added, "*You sure you can handle this?*"

Nolan smiled. "*No. I'm not. But you didn't have a choice back then.*"

She did have a choice, and she had made all the choices on her own. She'd give him that. If she had chosen differently...

Her hand went to her stomach. No ifs. She loved Archie, and from the moment she saw his little flickering heart on the monitor, she'd known. So maybe Nolan was right—she hadn't really had a choice. Planned or unplanned didn't matter, not when it came to the heart.

...

"There's my little man," Izzy squealed as she came in the front door and took Archie from Gaby. She snuggled in, breathing that intoxicating baby smell, as Archie gripped her hair. Painful, but she couldn't let go, not when she missed him so much.

Being a working parent sucked.

"Any leads on someone to watch Archie next week?"

Izzy shook her head, still stuck to Archie like Velcro. "No, and I know he needs day care, but I can't even afford to pay you rent on my salary." She pried baby hands off her hair, losing only a few strands. "Nolan offered to help."

Gaby crossed her arms. "Good. He should pay up."

Izzy set Archie on the floor and watched him crawl over to his toys. "Actually, he suggested we both watch Archie at work. I talked with the director and maybe it's because of how small the agency is, or because she's got kids of her

own, but she approved it.”

“That’s great.”

“And Nolan invited us to stay with him.”

Gaby stilled. “What? Are you out of your mind? What do you even know about this guy?”

Izzy narrowed her eyes. “Says the woman who invited a stranger home for Passover.”

Gaby fisted her hips but said nothing. Izzy had her on this point and they both knew it.

“But this is your baby,” Gaby said.

“His baby, too. And a lot better than dealing with kitchen construction.” Baby eclipsed random date for Passover, which had worked immensely in her sister’s favor, a fact Izzy still harbored jealousy over. Who picked a random guy at the gym, brought him home as a fake date, and fell in love? Sure, she’d created a kid with a random guy at a Deaf event, but that hadn’t exactly worked into love, just lust.

And scarily on-point fertility.

They stared at each other as Levi walked into the room. Gaby turned to him. “*Sorry we weren’t signing.*”

Levi picked up Archie. “*No. That’s fine. I don’t need to see you two fight. And neither does he.*” He tossed Archie into the air amid squeals of delight, before leaving them alone.

Izzy’s heart ached. That should have been Nolan and Archie. But at least Archie had that connection with his future uncle.

“Are you sure about this?” Gaby asked, her voice softening.

Izzy raised her chin, as she’d done each time she came up with an idea that someone else would call impulsive. The only one she’d ever regretted were the bangs she cut herself, not that she’d done a bad job, she just didn’t have a face for bangs. “Not one hundred percent, no. But I trusted him enough to bring him home and create Archie in the first place. If anyone should help while you two are gone, it’s his father.” She bit her lip. “And maybe it will give him a chance

to see how wonderful his son is.”

Gaby pulled Izzy into a hug. “Archie is wonderful. And if Nolan doesn’t realize it, then he doesn’t deserve him.”

Izzy wanted to cry, but she shoved her emotions down. She had never been a crier before, and postpartum hormones were no laughing matter. “So let me do this. Then I’ll know whether to hope he comes around or cut my losses.”

Gaby gave Izzy a final squeeze before releasing her. “Okay. But know you’ve got me and Levi.”

“You two need to start living your own lives.”

“Family is family.”

Exactly why she had to do this.

...

Nolan stood in his living room, scoping out his two-bedroom apartment, wondering what he needed to have a baby stay with him.

Everything.

And he hadn’t the foggiest idea what fell under everything. Images of the kid sitting on his couch, video game controller in hand and nursing a soda while they played rang as 100 percent false. For starters, Archie would be nursing a bottle, or getting his milk directly from his mother. And considering how everything he touched went directly into his mouth, the controller would, too. Though Nolan had to admit, he wondered what type of sick moves that might create.

Foolish fantasy images aside, he should text Izzy and find out what he needed to prepare, but he somehow hadn’t managed to get her phone number yet. Or still. Another failure on his part. They had a kid together—shared phone numbers should be the least of their connection.

His phone vibrated and he wondered if she’d found him, only the text came from his mother.

Mom: *How you doing?*

Yeah, he hadn't checked in with her in a while, not since Izzy informed him of the son he hadn't known he had. Because he had no clue how to have this conversation.

Nolan: *Good.*

Mom: *Job okay? I should know the answer, since you are close by now, but you seem more adrift than when you were in NY.*

Adrift. Not too far away, always adrift.

Nolan: *Good.*

Mom: *Good. Good. My talkative son. How about a sentence?*

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Nolan: *The job is going well. Lots to do, since the position is new and their social media interactions have been lacking.*

Mom: *And that's why they hired you. I knew always having your head in technology would work out for you.*

If he didn't mess it up first.

He wanted to type more, to mention Izzy, but mentioning Izzy meant mentioning Archie, and he wasn't doing that via text.

He switched to video.

His mother's face with her short bob of salt-and-pepper hair appeared on screen, too close at first but then she adjusted her phone. *"Oh, my son still has a face, look at that. Handsome as ever."*

He grimaced and his mother's smile faded.

"What's wrong?" The sign held steel behind it. She hadn't known ASL when he'd been born, but she learned for him and mastered it for him. Izzy hadn't known much ASL when they first met, but she'd continued and made sure their son

learned as well. He might not have a father figure in his life, but he had his mother, and he could live up to her example.

"I have something to tell you, something I recently found out." He wished he had a picture, something more than his words to give to his mother. In order to have a picture he needed more than one meeting with his kid.

Prepared or not, he was glad Izzy had agreed to stay. More time with the both of them meant a chance to see if he had any paternal instincts at all.

"I'm waiting." Her eyebrows raised and he'd bet his entire salary she hadn't a clue what was coming.

"I met up with someone I had dated. She has a son." He swallowed. *"My son. He's nine months old."*

"Explain now." Her stern face demanded he comply.

"History repeats itself. Condom didn't work."

Her shrewd gaze bored into him even through the phone. *"You know that fails sometimes and it's important to be there, to be present."*

"We were drunk, what do you expect?"

His mother closed her eyes and signed with them closed. *"Words a mother loves to see."*

He waved until she opened them. *"Like alcohol didn't have a part in my conception?"*

She bobbed her head side to side, her short hair swishing with the motion. *"Fine. And you wait until now to tell me?"*

"Izzy was an ASL student. She didn't catch my name and we didn't exchange numbers. We met again a week ago."

His mother blew out a breath, lips pursed. *"Always get a number."* She glanced up. *"You have a son. When can I meet him?"*

"I've met him only once. They're staying here next week while construction is being done where Izzy lives. What do I need for a baby?" He angled his phone, taking in his apartment.

"Oh my dear child, you are not set up for a baby at all."

"I know that. What do I do?"

"Unless you know the first thing about Babyproofing 101, I'd wait on the mother for this. She'll know what that child needs."

Not the help he had hoped for. *"No words of advice?"*

"You be there for that child, for the mother. Figure something out. I know you are not your father. Prove it."

"Thanks." As far as pep talks went, that one fell off the radar. But every word she signed held truth to it.

He disconnected the call, no calmer or more prepared than before. He moved to his office and looked around the small room. The space could barely be called a bedroom; his desk and futon left a sliver of an area for walking and nothing else. Granted, when the futon unfolded that sliver disappeared. Nolan scratched his head. There had to be some way to fit a baby in here. He'd have to move things one way or another, but he had no clue where Archie would sleep.

Or Izzy.

He moved to his bedroom. Not much extra space here, but a queen bed fit. Izzy could stay here and he'd take the couch. He thumbed an imaginary controller, needing the fidget action, wondering whether it was Izzy sleeping here or him taking the couch that settled like curdled milk. The only night he'd spent with her had been in her bed, a college-regulated dorm one at that. He still remembered the sensation of her in his arms, how good it felt, even after sex when things should have grown awkward.

But thoughts of her close and thoughts of that long-ago night made his skin itch. He hadn't wanted to walk away that morning after, and now seeing her every day, seeing their kid, hadn't done a damn thing to help.

But no, she wouldn't be sharing his bed. Not with both of them working at the same agency. Co-parents, that was all they could be at the moment, perhaps all they'd ever be.

He'd wait for Izzy, and if the flicker in his gut felt more like anticipation than nerves, he'd deal with that later as well.

Chapter Eight

Izzy checked her GPS again as she pulled into the parking lot behind Nolan's building. The screen changed, proudly proclaiming she'd arrived at her destination, as though the difficult part of the day had been the drive and not what came next. She angled her rearview visor to pick up the little green frog mirror in front of Archie. "Ready to spend the week with your father?"

She cringed at the words, at the implication. But Archie flailed his little feet and arms, and for a moment Izzy wished for the simplicity of youth coupled with the absolute joy of not knowing what was going on.

Then Archie started fussing and she gave up on her wish. Sure, he was a happy baby, but he couldn't get what he wanted and adults controlled his every move.

Still, being an adult hadn't turned into a fun-filled bag of toys.

The building in front of her was a standard apartment complex with a brick exterior. Not the type one gleaned an insight into the inhabitants, especially as no porches existed.

She took a fortifying breath. She'd never lived with a non-related man outside of Levi. The fact that he'd been her ASL instructor didn't matter when he loved her sister. He was family, or would soon be once they set a date. So in this equation he didn't count. Sure, he was good-looking, but he wasn't Nolan, who made her insides turn squishy.

Izzy shook her head and got out of the car.

Once she had Archie in his stroller, with his bag stuffed underneath and her bag over her shoulder, she headed around the building for the front and stopped short at the four steps leading to the entrance. No ramp.

Izzy clamped her molars together and worked at calming her already rising frustration. Not exactly ADA compliant. Did Nolan even have the notification lights he needed?

She pulled out her phone, ready to text Nolan for some help, only she somehow didn't have his number. Izzy glanced up at the cloudless sky. "Great, just great. If you were gonna send me a signal, you could have done that *before* I slept with him!"

Archie clapped as though he agreed, and mortification heated her cheeks. *Stop it, Isabel, get a grip.* She angled the stroller so she could see Archie. "Ready for a bumpy ride?"

He clapped some more, drool deepening the top of his blue onesie to a navy tone. His wide smile calmed her nerves. She suspected he'd clap right through a scolding lecture, or adult argument, but at least he remained happy.

She turned the stroller around and tried to pull it up a step, but her bag slapped her backside and with the stroller weighted down by his bag she'd be out of breath by the time she hit the top step. She grabbed both bags and deposited them at the top, then slid/lifted the stroller up to the top step.

More clapping. Her very own personal cheerleader. She moved in front of the stroller, giving her son a little bow. He squealed in delight. "For my next magic trick, I'll tackle that door." *Please don't be locked, please don't be locked, please don't be locked.*

It was locked.

Dammit.

The name listings to the side held little buzzers and she thumbed down until she came to N. Holtzman and pressed. She didn't know if there was a speaking system somewhere,

but that wouldn't matter for a deaf man. A slight breeze blew past, and Izzy welcomed the cooling action on this not quite fall weather day as the door buzzed.

She pulled it open, then propped it on her hip, assessing the situation like a complex math problem—if the stroller weighs ten pounds, and the baby weighs twenty, and Izzy had a doughnut for breakfast, how many weights did she need to lift last year to complete the task? She didn't know the answer, but she did pull the stroller from where Archie held on, only to realize the door held another step and from her angle she couldn't gain the leverage to get it over.

Definitely needed to lift more weights while pregnant. Why didn't the baby books prepare her for lifting large and heavy objects?

The temptation to tuck tail and run away stirred, but that would only put her back at a place without a working kitchen and construction noises. Besides, Nolan had already buzzed her in, and Izzy completed her challenges. Some days they were solving engine problems by the side of the highway, or giving birth. Today she battled a door.

When Levi arrived back home, she was having him help her gain muscle mass. Stellar arms were in her future.

For now she tried to yank the stroller in, but the angle got only one wheel up. She paused, breathed deep, and checked on her kid. Archie flashed her a smile, not even a hint of worry that his mother didn't have the arms for this task.

She moved to readjust, but that meant leaving the door. She swung it open and quickly angled the stroller, but the wheel hit a snag and it took her two seconds too long to fix it, and by then the door had clicked closed once again.

Izzy dropped her shoulders, ready to wave a white flag and claim defeat. Surely the universe was down for her creating Archie, just not connecting with Nolan.

She hit the buzzer—she wouldn't give up that easily. Hand on the door, she waited for the signal, but it didn't come. She checked back where she thought the speaker system

lay. Maybe there was a camera and Nolan had taken one look at her incompetence and decided to ignore her.

Archie babbled and she squatted down in front of him. “What do you think, kid, should we cut our losses and deal with construction? Or give your father another try?”

He flashed his bottom teeth in a grin and waved his arms, clearly in support of one of those notions, though he wouldn’t tell her which. Or he was down for anything, knowing as a baby he didn’t really have much say in the situation.

Movement inside caught her attention, and she looked up in hope of some nice resident willing to lend her a helping hand. Then the figure came into view wearing well-worn jeans with a threadbare patch on his thigh, a RIT T-shirt stretched over his broad chest—clearly he’d been thinner when he’d purchased it—and no shoes. She needed a bib to catch her drool.

“*Need help?*” Nolan signed.

She blew a strand of hair away from her face. Great, he probably watched her fumbling and thought she’d drop the kid. Pride wanted to sign “*no*” and keep going herself, but motherhood had taught her that pride got her nowhere and she needed the assistance. “*Too many steps, yes.*”

Nolan nodded and opened the door, grabbing the stroller from the front, and pulling it inside as though Izzy had no reason to struggle. Archie squealed and, if she wasn’t mistaken, was happy to see Nolan.

She grabbed their bags, weighing down each shoulder, and followed Nolan into the sparse lobby area that held mailboxes and stairs. No elevator.

This wasn’t going to work. She turned to explain to Nolan, but he plucked a bag off her shoulder, grabbed the front and back of the stroller, and effortlessly carried a squealing Archie up the stairs.

The only other person to carry heavy baby stuff with ease was Levi.

Nolan stopped at the first landing, thankfully, and rolled down the hall to the open door at unit fourteen. It occurred to her that regardless of whether he saw her fumbling like an idiot, he'd come down in a hurry to help them.

That warmed away her embarrassment, and she didn't dare identify why. After all, wasn't it the least he could do after she gave birth to his son?

He wheeled the stroller into the apartment, and for some reason Izzy glanced at the doorframe. Not something she did consciously or often, but in this case, it allowed her to catch the mezuzah—a small scroll of prayers—that Jews put on their doors to bless their homes.

Holtzman certainly sounded Jewish, but in this day and age she did her best not to assume. Still, she fingered the tiny scroll, even though for all she knew this had been put up by a previous resident.

"You're Jewish?" she asked once he turned to face her after parking the stroller in the middle of his living room. At first glance she caught a simple, nearly vacant space filled with a couch, coffee table, and entertainment center and little else.

"Yes."

"Same." She touched the scroll again, why, she had no clue. Not like she knew any prayers or further traditions besides setting one up. She moved into the unit. At least odds were higher that he wouldn't have a problem with her circumcising their son.

She glanced around the living space, the stroller dwarfing the room. Beige carpet, beige couch, light brown furniture. Not a lot of color or personality. The place screamed "college student turned bachelor pad" and she bet he had a futon somewhere. It wasn't a home, rather a brief stopping point.

Then again, she doubted she'd have much different if life had followed a more traditional path.

"I should have left that in the car," she signed, blanking on the sign for stroller, but knowing pointing would do the trick.

Nolan raised a shoulder. *"It's fine. And it gives us time to*

figure out what needs to be moved." He sent her a sheepish grin. *"I have no clue how to babyproof."*

Izzy studied the space. She did her best not to freak out about table ends and things like that, but Nolan clearly got his job due to being into technology. Lots of cords, lots of overloaded outlets, and a kid that liked to poke and mouth everything did not make the best combination. In fact, she assumed Archie's current flailing in the stroller indicated his interest in getting electrocuted.

Her hands fumbled. She'd done most of the babyproofing with Gaby and hadn't needed to figure out all the signs. *"I don't know the signs, but..."* She walked over and picked up a cord. *"He will eat, that's bad,"*—she pointed to the outlet and mimed sticking fingers in—*"also bad."* She looked around, found something that looked breakable on a low shelf and mimed it falling.

They spent the next ten minutes moving things around and blocking cords and outlets. Her brief attempt at interior decorating came in handy, even if safety was the ultimate goal. It wasn't ideal, but it should work, especially if they both kept Archie in sight.

Izzy unbuckled Archie and set him down. Instead of sitting or crawling, he stood, hand clutching hers. She gave him her other one and with her support he walked around, checking out this new place.

"He walks?" Nolan's eyes widened.

Izzy bopped her head side to side and managed to remove one hand to sign. *"With help, not on his own, not yet."* Archie reached for her, so she gave him back her hand and he picked up speed, walking around the living room, ignoring the open kitchen, and heading down the hall to the room at the end.

An office, complete with desk and—she nailed it—college futon. Archie moved over to the futon and let go of Izzy's hands, finding something his height. He held on and bounced, more drool sliding down his chin.

Izzy wiped it away and turned to Nolan in the doorway. *"You both can stay here or take my room. I can sleep on the couch if needed."*

"I have a travel crib, but it's still in my car." Izzy glanced around. She could easily set up Archie in here, though there wouldn't be room for the futon to be pulled out. But she was used to sleeping near him, so maybe she'd curl up without a full bed. It was only for a week.

"I can get it for you." Nolan held out his hand for the keys, and Izzy hesitated. Her instinct was to grab it herself, because that's how she lived. Her sister's help could not be beat, but Izzy did her best not to infringe, to do as much as she could. Her baby, her choice, her responsibility. She suspected her sister knew all this and pushed her way in to help, big sister rules and all. But Izzy leaned on them enough as it was.

Nolan was different. He held equal responsibility for Archie's conception. She needed to let him help. She handed over her keys, resisted the urge to overexplain what he'd be looking for. And then Nolan was gone and she stood in a strange apartment, in a strange room, with the baby who connected her to a stranger.

She scooped up Archie and held him close. "What do you think, baby boy?"

He squealed and clutched her hair, making her wonder yet again if she needed to chop her long locks to keep it away from baby hands. She pushed that thought aside and held him tighter, knowing they'd make it through this week the way they always had, by sheer determination alone.

...

After Nolan's third trip to Izzy's car he decided it resembled a magician's box. He'd thought the two large bags she originally had were enough, but then came the crib, and the portable table chair, and the freezer bag of pureed food. He

thought he'd gotten the last bag, but there were a few others still in her trunk, and he had no clue what else to expect.

For a small kid he had a lot of stuff.

They sat at his table as Izzy fed Archie something pureed and green, and Archie accepted it like it was the best chocolate ice cream. Nolan had ordered a pizza for Izzy and him, not wanting to do anything on his stove with a curious kid who had already tried to find a path to the multiple wires Nolan had. Only, said pizza now cooled untouched on Izzy's plate, as she focused on Archie's meal.

"What time does he sleep?" he inquired, trying to plan the night and figure things out.

Izzy's shoulders bounced in laughter. *"Sleep, that's a funny word. Archie goes to bed around nine, then is up one to two times a night to nurse, diaper change, or play."*

Nolan took a closer look at Izzy and the dark coloring under her eyes. When was the last time she got a good night's sleep? He feared the answer was before Archie had been born. He wanted to help, but he still didn't know the first thing about caring for a baby and hadn't even begun to contemplate his future.

He. Had. A. Kid. In his kitchen, eating pureed green glop and smiling. And no matter what he did, he'd always have a kid, always have this extension of himself and responsibility.

Nolan shoved the last bite of his second slice into his mouth and held out his hand. *"Let me take over. You need to eat."*

Izzy opened her mouth, ready to fight him he guessed, but nodded and handed over the green glop. Archie followed the transaction, tiny hands smacking the table, opening his mouth like a baby bird waiting to be fed.

Nolan stuck the spoon in the glop and pulled out a large mound. Archie's mouth opened and closed, but Izzy banged on the table, the vibration pulling his attention. Nolan faced her, and she signed, *"Less food, he'll choke."*

Nolan reduced the mound by half, then moved it toward Archie. The kid leaned forward, gobbling it up before Nolan got close enough, green stuff sliding down his chin. Nolan copied what he'd seen Izzy do, scooping up the falling bits, and slipping it back into Archie's mouth.

Like giving Archie a bottle, Nolan had an emotional reaction to feeding this kid. He didn't expect it, or understand it, but couldn't deny this odd sense of connection and satisfaction at keeping a part of him alive. He didn't dare sign that out loud, because it would sound more like keeping a plant or a fish alive, not a human baby.

"What is this?" Nolan asked, as Izzy reached for a second slice.

"Peas."

Nolan took a sniff of the container and was met with a strong bang from Archie. He glanced at the kid, who had tears in his eyes. *"I'm smelling, not eating."* Archie didn't care, but once Nolan brought the spoon to the baby, he happily chomped it down.

Okay then.

Izzy waved for his attention. *"I know, many suggest to go straight to table foods, and peas are small, but the one time I had something not pureed Archie choked, so I feel safer this way."*

Nolan nodded as if he were aware of any of this and not simply reacting to the color and consistency of the food. Then something occurred to him. *"You made this?"*

Izzy nodded. *"It's easy enough to puree, and cheaper."* Her hands flailed, like she wanted to say more but didn't have the words for it.

"Thank you," he signed before even thinking it through. He continued to be amazed by this woman and knew he would have messed it up. And feared he still would.

"For?" Izzy's eyebrows shot up, an amused tilt to her lips. That small change in her facial expression hit him low in the gut. Her beauty always there, always reaching for him,

drawing him to her. And he knew without a shadow of a doubt there wasn't a chance in them not creating Archie unless they had never met.

"Taking care of him." He reached over and ruffled the barely there strands on Archie's head, then smoothed it down, needing the feel of this little being. Thoughts and emotions wanted to consume him, but he pushed those aside and went back to feeding the baby. They were here in part because of his job, a job that wouldn't approve of this connection between them. He'd do good to remember this fact. He could help, as long as he steered clear of that line. They both needed their jobs, to support their child. It didn't matter what sparks remained, the job prevented them from exploring further.

Chapter Nine

Izzy leaned over the travel crib, settling Archie on his back for the night. The nine-month-old kicked in his sleeping sack, rubbing his eyes, not the least bit perturbed by the change in location, or Nolan hovering by the door. Unlike Izzy, who felt the silent observer throughout the entire bedtime routine of reading a book and singing a song. The one person who should have been there all along.

Izzy apologized for her lack of signing, but he brushed her off, insisting he didn't mind. Izzy did sign to Archie often, but by the end of the day she found herself too tired and in need of soft speaking and quiet hands. The rare exception being when Levi would pop in and take over story time.

She signed, *"I-love-you,"* as Archie continued to flail on his back, before turning off the light and walking down the hall. Nolan followed.

"He's not asleep."

"Not yet. He's learned how to fall asleep on his own." She wanted to explain about sleep training and the endless nights of listening to him cry it out, but didn't have the energy or the words.

Unsure what to do next, Izzy plopped down on the couch. On a typical night she'd escape to the living room until Archie fell asleep. There she'd hang out with Gaby or Levi, watch TV, or read a book. Here she wasn't fully sure where she'd sleep and hadn't even managed to unpack.

Nolan joined her. *"You're good with him."*

She scoffed before she could catch herself. *"Don't have much choice."*

"Yes. You do. Just because you have a kid, or decide to keep one, doesn't mean you'll be a good parent. You sign with him because of me and your sister's fiancé. Some deaf children don't even get that."

She didn't know how to respond, so she thanked him, wondering why his praise meant as much as it did. His brown eyes were open and clear and, even though she barely knew him, she knew this was sincere. *"I love him, you know. He's my world and even if I could change the past, I wouldn't."* Hardships and timing aside, she meant that down to her core.

"Good. I think I feel the same." His gaze switched to the hall, where their son slept, or tried to sleep. And for the first time she really felt it. Theirs. Archie belonged to both of them. Who knew what the future held, but the simple fact remained.

"I'm glad we found you. And I'm sorry I couldn't find you earlier."

He waved her off. *"That's as much my fault as it is yours. Which reminds me, I still don't have your number."*

Add that to the list of things they did backward. They quickly exchanged numbers, eighteen months too late.

Izzy rested her head against the couch, tired to her bones. Even with the permanent sluggish feeling of being an overtired parent, she also had a new feeling of contentment. Nolan was here. Nolan knew Archie. All the unknowns still tried to weigh her down, but she forced them away. One step at a time. Regardless of outcome, these moments were important.

"You're tired," he said.

"I haven't had a full night's sleep since I was six months pregnant." And at that, she yawned.

"You can take my room, then. I'll stay out here."

She wanted to laugh. *"Nice offer but I'll still need to take*

care of Archie throughout the night. I wish for the day he sleeps straight through."

Nolan touched her cheek, a soft pressure matching the concern deep in his eyes. *"I'm sorry."*

"Not your fault." She thought about that one. *"No, maybe it is. Do bad sleepers run in your family?"*

He shrugged, his hand now resting against her neck, and her pulse kicked into high speed. This, *this* her heart remembered. And Izzy feared it wasn't the memory of a lover's touch, but more Nolan's. His thumb rubbed back and forth and tension oozed straight out of her, lulling her into a state of bliss. She wanted to feel his lips on hers, sober, and see if that same magic repeated. She wanted to snuggle closer. Maybe not to do all the things; her body wasn't quite the same, but touching and being touched in a way that didn't involve a nine-month-old tempted.

She shifted forward, and as if he had an internal mommy sensor, Archie started crying, breaking through the moment. Izzy pulled back. *"He's crying."* Only she ended up yawning, again. Damn, another sleepless night was in her future.

Before she could move, Nolan stood. *"I'll check on him."*

"Do you know what to do?"

He lifted a shoulder. *"No, but he is my son."* And with that he turned and headed down the hall, leaving Izzy in a blizzard of emotions, and her heart close to bursting.

...

Nolan had no clue why he offered to check on Archie. The only answer he had pointed to Izzy. When he was around her his brain turned off and rational thought ceased. As though someone had grabbed the controller and he had no choice but to go along and accept this new fate. More than any silly game-play analogy he could generate, she was tired. Exhausted, really, and he could do this small thing to help her out.

Also, his kid was crying. Maybe it had to do with them both staying in his apartment and the responsibility factor shooting up, but Nolan's legs carried him down the hall to where a teary-eyed baby stood, hands on the side of the crib, crying. And the sight did something to Nolan, gripped at him way down deep. To the point where he didn't think, autopilot still in control, and walked right over and lifted Archie into his arms.

He'd never done that before. Some form of buried instinct took over, and he bounced Archie as the kid gripped his shirt and shoved it into his mouth.

Huh. Nolan glanced around and found the pacifier wedged into the corner of the crib. He picked it up and offered it to Archie.

The baby shoved it into his mouth, and it was only afterward that Nolan realized he didn't check to make sure the item was clean. Then Archie laid his head on Nolan's shoulder while he sucked away, grip tight on the shirt.

Nolan continued to rock. Izzy might have spoken or sung, he wasn't sure. He wanted both hands on the baby, one supporting the weight, the other holding him close. Soon the grip on Nolan's shirt loosened and when he glanced down, Archie's eyes were closed and a slow motion lingered on the pacifier. He moved to the crib and bent over, slowly transferring the baby to his back as Izzy had done. He knew something about back versus stomach sleeping and vice versa, but not the details.

One step back and he waited for the eyelids to pop open and the crying to resume. It didn't. The slow bob of the pacifier continued. Nolan took a moment to watch Archie sleep, the tiny button nose, the lashes on his cheek. No doubt about it, Izzy and he had made a cute kid. He wanted to take a picture, or draw the kid, he liked drawing—especially on his computer graphics program—but now wasn't the time. He hadn't drawn a human in years, not since his crush senior year of college. His art was for him, of

things he wanted to preserve, or to get a little creativity out. With the baby it kicked into the preservation desire.

With those odd thoughts and scary unnamed emotions swimming through him, he made his way back to the living room. There he found another set of similar eyes closed, eyelashes brushing cheeks. Izzy lay curled up on her side, fast asleep.

Good, she needs it.

Of course the urge to draw her welled up inside, but he quashed it. He had to figure out what to do about the sleeping beauty on his couch. He could cover her, but she deserved more than a damn couch. He didn't dare wake her and wasn't sure if he could move her easily.

Archie transferred just fine. Did he take after his mother?

Nolan stepped closer to Izzy, hoping his movements would startle her and he could send her to his room. No such luck. She remained asleep, a gentle rise and fall of her chest, and he had to resist the urge to brush her hair off her face.

A truth grew within him. He'd been a dead man walking the moment he laid eyes on her. The fact the attraction held, still drew him closer, meant Archie was inevitable, their union inevitable. Their job meant they had to stay apart, and he wondered if that would be a good thing in the end, fewer chances of them crashing and burning and making tending to Archie more of a challenge. For now, he'd care for both of them the best he could.

Nolan slipped a hand under Izzy's knees, then another under her neck, and lifted her into his arms. She snuggled in, much like her son, and remained asleep. He took a moment, relishing her closeness, then stopped himself before she woke while he stood there cradling her like an idiot. With careful steps he carried her into his room and settled her on the bed. She curled up on her side but didn't wake.

Good.

Except he had her above the covers, and dressed in her

clothes, and he didn't dare attempt any other moves. Regardless of the kid in the adjacent room, he had no right to touch her further or change her outfit. He pulled the comforter up from the opposite side and draped it across her, before grabbing sweatpants and a T-shirt and backing out of the room, doing his best not to think about the beauty with wavy brown hair spread over his pillow.

Once changed, he checked on mother and son, both still fast asleep. Nolan lingered at Archie's door, following the slow rise and fall of the baby's chest. That urge to capture the moment refueled, and he pulled out his phone, tapped the flash off, and snapped a picture. He cringed, panic rising when the phone somehow still flashed and a yellow light shone on Archie before the picture took. *Shit*. Nolan held his breath, watching the baby, and even though he stirred he didn't wake up. Afraid of making any further foolish mistakes, he backed out of the room. A drawing would have been smarter, but he didn't know how long he could stay there without disturbing the baby. Izzy still slept, unaware of his accidental attempt at waking the kid.

Then he settled onto the couch, with a spare blanket, and stared at his ceiling. He had a lot of new responsibilities and emotions to sort through, but thoughts of Archie and Izzy lulled him to sleep before he could figure out a damn thing.

...

Izzy woke to confusion. The usual sleep-deprived state wrapped her like a cocoon, making everything fuzzy, the baby's cries the only sure thing. She tried to move, to get out of bed and grab Archie, but her legs met blanket and the usual way out of her bed wasn't the usual.

Izzy sat up, awake now, registering the strange room she'd slept in. Nolan's. No sign of the man himself, as the uncovered sheets next to her lay vacant. Which meant he brought her here and let her be. After untangling her legs,

she peeked into the hall as Archie's wails went from "I'm hungry" to "You better feed me now!" Nolan slept on the couch, blissfully unaware. That's what she got for having a kid with a Deaf guy. She'd already heard Gaby complain about how Levi was the only one sleeping through the night.

In the spare room, Archie clung to the side of the crib. Izzy picked him up and lifted her shirt as she sat, unclipping her nursing bra. Archie latched on with that single-minded precision of his. Izzy leaned back, blinking the room into focus, when all she wanted to do was nod off while the baby nursed.

She took in the space, the simple long desk with a computer screen and a few other items she couldn't register in the dark. The size of the room itself wasn't bad, remove the furniture and there'd be plenty of room for—

She cut off her train of thought. *Wrong direction, Izzy.* After this week she'd go back to staying with her sister and figuring out some long-term plan for getting out on her own. Maybe with a little child support she'd manage that sooner rather than later.

However, the notion of going back to being on her own didn't sit well. Something about this new arrangement felt right. Even if Nolan had no clue she'd been woken by crying, they were still a family. Dysfunctional and barely held together, but a family. Hers consisted of her sister, her mother, and her late father, as well as her mom's Italian greyhound, her aunt, and other extended family members. It was big and wonderful and full of overbearing love, but ever since Archie's birth, she'd been aware of how one-sided it was. A birth united two sides of a family tree, and until now she hadn't known where to find the other side.

All this reminded her that she knew nothing about the rest of Nolan's tree. One day she would. For Archie.

The baby finished and she fixed her shirt, then pulled out the diaper bag and did a quick diaper change. After she settled Archie back to sleep, she got into pajamas and

ventured into the living room.

Nolan remained asleep. He had one arm above his head, a position she'd seen Archie in many times. A tiny laugh worked up inside her. Like father like son. The urge to curl up next to him grew, and she had to shake it away. Loneliness, that's all it was, all it could be at the moment. The thought made her sad, but she needed this job, and she suspected he felt the same way. As her first post-college job, she'd do well not to lose it by lusting after her supervisor, baby daddy or no baby daddy.

Izzy returned to Nolan's room and climbed under his blankets. Turned out, it was the next best thing to snuggling with the man himself.

Chapter Ten

Nolan stood by his coffeemaker Monday morning, wishing the slow drip of coffee would hurry the hell up. Not because he was short on time, not exactly, but his entire morning routine had been destroyed, and he needed caffeine to handle it all. His usual morning involved exercise, then taking a shower, and grabbing a quick breakfast on the way to work. This all became impossible, because he didn't dare do a relaxed morning while Izzy bustled around getting herself and Archie ready.

For a tiny human, he created a lot more work.

So Nolan stood, gaining his bearings, as Izzy held Archie on her hip and pulled out a small yogurt container. He figured that would be her breakfast, but then she set Archie into his chair and began spooning the food into his eager mouth.

Nolan got his coffee, added a splash of cream, and sipped, trying like hell to wake up. Two sips later he realized Izzy's hair hung in damp strands around her face, her body wrapped in a pink robe, and a scent of some flowery body wash competing with the smell of coffee.

She'd showered already. Which meant he had less competition for the bathroom. But that brought thoughts of her naked, under the running water, and he grew impossibly hard. And now when he did shower, all he'd be able to think of was the woman who'd been in there and had left some of her scent behind.

Mind out of the gutter, Holtzman. He needed to put these erotic thoughts on pause, or disable the program altogether, otherwise he'd make a fool of himself right there in his kitchen. He focused on Izzy's face, and some of his lust Control-Alt-Deleted away. With her face free of makeup, the dark circles under her eyes appeared more prominent. He had the urge to walk over and run his thumb along the deep coloring, as though that simple action would do a damn thing. Concern replaced his previously scheduled program, only he hadn't a clue which actions he needed to make a difference. At a loss, he held up a fresh coffee pod. "*Want?*"

Izzy's eyes lit up, as though he offered a secret game bonus round equivalent, and not a measly little hit of caffeine. "*Please.*"

He plucked out the used pod and popped in a fresh one, pressing the buttons to brew. Izzy's tiredness lingered in a thick fog around her, accentuated by a yawn, and it kicked him square in the gut. He should have done something to be more involved and prevent that yawn. That urge, that need, wanted to consume him, but he hadn't the foggiest idea how or what he might do. He'd created this mess. And he felt utterly helpless.

He got some cream at Izzy's request, then found some sugar and placed the steaming mug in front of her. She sipped one-handed, the other still feeding Archie, multitasking in the way of mothers everywhere. Nolan would have spilled one, or both, and probably got a few burns in the process.

Clueless on how to help, he needed to get his own ass ready for the day. "*I'm going to shower and then I can help until we're ready to drive over.*"

Izzy shook her head, and put down her mug. "*I'm fine. And we should drive separately.*"

"*Why?*" They were going to the same damn place.

She leveled him with a stare and put down the yogurt, much to a banging Archie's protests. "*Does work know we*

have a kid together?"

Nolan shifted on his bare feet. Shook his head.

"That's why. We're new. I don't want to lose my job. I suspect you feel the same."

"Right." Why hadn't he thought of that? Because his routine was off and Izzy's bathrobe had parted, giving him a glimpse of cleavage he desperately wanted to explore. Nolan backed out, unsure why the whole conversation felt... off. The need to change things stirred deep inside. He didn't want to hide, but he also needed to make sure he took care of Izzy.

With the water streaming down his back and the coffee finally doing its magic in his system, a horrible realization hit Nolan: he'd never talked with Deanna about his involvement in Archie's care. Izzy had discussed her part, and Izzy watching her son made sense. But Nolan, he had no reason to be helping out, not to the extent he planned, and that stung. With the damn no-dating policy he couldn't risk the ramifications of revealing his paternity. The thought stung, but he squashed it. He'd fix it, somehow.

He finished showering, then helped Izzy with a few small things before heading into work. Alone. Once there, he chased down Deanna and caught up with her in the small kitchen, watching the coffee brew. *"I was looking for you,"* he signed after he caught her attention.

She held a finger to her mouth. *"Not before coffee."*

"You can have some at home." Would taste better, too.

She smiled as she filled a blue mug. *"I like my sleep too much."* A white packet of sugar later, she took a sip and faced him. *"What's up?"*

Nolan's hands froze and fumbled over what to say. Simple, start simple. And vague. He shook them out and pushed forward. *"You know Izzy has childcare issues this week. I've offered to help. Just a heads-up there will be a baby in my office for the week."*

"That's sweet of you to help."

Relief flooded him. Crisis avoided. Two gold stars for the day. He got why Shanice brought her daughter in as necessary, not even an inkling of an issue from Deanna.

"You know anything about babies?" She smirked.

"Not really." Beyond how to create them.

She laughed and patted his shoulder. *"Let me know if you need any help; I can pitch in as needed. My kids are teenagers now, so I could use a little baby snuggling."* Then she took her cup and left the room. Nolan's feet remained rooted to the spot. He disliked keeping his true intentions a secret, even more with the realization he'd have to keep this fake persona of a guy helping out to be nice, not as a father stepping up. For as long as they both worked here, Archie couldn't be his son.

...

Izzy had never been so grateful for morning naps in her life. Her kid's, not hers. She sat at her desk, scrolling through the different social media accounts, while a baby wrap held a sleeping Archie against her chest. Her heart burst a bit at the closeness. She'd love a job like this, where she could work from home and keep him close.

She also knew the toddler years were ahead of her, and she'd soon relish the breaks.

Lisa walked into the area, then came over and propped a hip on Izzy's desk, eyes on Archie. She'd largely ignored Izzy up until now, so the behavior had Izzy taking notice. "You shouldn't have a kid here."

Izzy pressed a hand onto Archie's back, holding him close and signing with the other hand. "He won't bother you. It's just for a week, because I have childcare issues."

Lisa's gaze landed on the sleeping baby. Izzy was used to people melting and cooing when they saw Archie. Lisa was the one person she couldn't read. "All I know is that if I had gotten the job, this wouldn't be a problem."

“Oh?” What could Izzy say to that? Izzy hadn’t known Lisa had tried for this position. It wasn’t her fault that Lisa didn’t get it. Izzy wondered if that was the only problem or if she gave Shanice this type of crap, too.

Lisa leaned forward, a gleam in her eyes Izzy didn’t trust. “I also caught Nolan talking to Deanna. I know he’s the hot new guy, but you do know that nothing can happen, right? The agency frowns on staff dating. You’re going to have to find a new baby daddy somewhere else.”

Hard to when he’s already the baby’s daddy. “I’m aware of the policy. He’s helping out, since I’m working primarily with him. If you have a problem, go talk to Deanna.” *The person who approved Archie being here in the first place.*

“Maybe I’m coming off wrong. I’m only trying to help out, since you’re new. And I’ve seen the way you look at him.” She tapped the desk and then moved back to her own, ending the conversation.

Izzy switched her attention to her screen, moving her mouse around absently. In what way did she look at Nolan? The question hadn’t been paternity related, yet a flicker of worry drummed up Izzy’s spine. She’d read the fraternization clause—twice—it made no mention of pre-employment relationships. As long as they kept things in the past, she’d hold out hope it would be a nonissue. And if that meant curtailing her awakening libido around the man, she’d find a way to survive.

A new email notification popped up and she clicked to open the message from Nolan.

Do you think you can provide voiceovers? Or have a better idea? I want to get these videos as accessible as possible.

The videos Nolan worked on were a bit of genius. ASL was a visual language, and their current website had everything in written English. Nolan’s vision would bring some of that information from 2D to 3D and help ensure accurate communication passed through. The idea was a great one and much needed, and she had a little thrill of excitement at

being a part of this. It worked right into her communication major, one of three she graduated with, thanks to her jumping around from field to field.

I can help. I even took a voice acting class in college, but 1) do you really want a female voicing for you? And 2) not with Archie sleeping against me.

She rocked Archie as she waited for the response, trying to imagine Nolan with a female voice. She'd heard only a few noises from him, not much to go on, but his looks would have gone well with a deep, booming voice, the kind that skittered across skin and made panties damp...

And she managed to turn herself on by imagining sound. She wrapped a hand around Archie, hoping the result of the last time she had sex would calm her down.

It didn't.

A new email came in and she checked Nolan's response.

1) I don't care what it sounds like, as long as it's understandable. 2) I can hold Archie.

Warmth spread through her, and even though it shouldn't have, it turned her on even more. Which was ridiculous. He was Archie's father, he *should* hold him. Who cared if it was so she could work? Okay, she cared. She knew enough about men to know some would wait for the kid to be awake, or insist they be put down on the floor somewhere.

Not Nolan.

Izzy carefully pushed back her chair and with one hand on Archie, the other on her desk, rose to a standing position. Lisa shot her a look, as though moving chairs and creaking floorboards wasn't all the rage in this building. Baby continued to sleep. Good.

She headed to Nolan's office and found him fiddling with a tripod facing a blank wall. He turned around and their eyes locked, heat simmering between them. She tightened her grip on their baby, but nothing less than a cold shower would do the trick now.

Nolan stepped toward them, eyes drifting down to Archie.

"He's cute asleep."

She dropped her gaze and pressed her lips to an upturned cheek. *"He's always cute."* She rubbed her hands together, more to stifle her awakened sexual state than anything else. *"Do you have a script for me? I should be able to follow your signs, but my English word choices will be weak."*

Nolan moved over to his desk and she did not follow the way his crisp jeans cupped his ass, that would be bad, even if guiding her eyes above waist level proved to be a challenge. He tapped a piece of paper and she managed to focus on his chest—short-sleeved dark-gray button-down pulled tight over his chest, another reminder that he'd filled out since they first met—and handed it over.

Izzy scanned the page, hoping she could calm down and the lust she couldn't extinguish wouldn't be dripping from her vocal cords. Although, with Nolan signing, who could blame her? She held up a thumb, glad it didn't shake. *"Ready?"*

He let out a breath and nodded. He tested the equipment again and then faced her. *"I guess I'll take Archie."*

He seemed nervous, and Izzy realized it probably had nothing to do with any of her thoughts. It had to be the baby. She didn't have time to ponder or worry. Work had to be done, and she wasn't going to be able to speak clearly while holding a kid and fearing she'd wake him.

She slid a hand underneath the fabric sling to hold Archie while reaching to the side to undo the knot. It took a minute, but she got it loose and unraveled the fabric. Archie remained snuggled against her and she handed the fabric over to a wide-eyed Nolan.

"How did you do that?" he asked before taking the fabric from her.

She swallowed a laugh. *"Practice since before he was born. I'll show you."* Only now she wondered how she'd manage to do that one-handed. As it was she felt awkward, as though her signs made even less sense than normal.

"First, find the center."

Nolan folded the fabric in half, and found the center. So far so good. But he held it up to the side, not in front of him. She bit her lip, trying to figure this out; she'd done it only with Gaby before. *"Hold open in front of you."* Crap, her ASL wasn't meant for this, not one-handed, at least. She needed to go find a video tutorial for them both.

But he followed her. She started to sign cross, but with one hand it wasn't going to be clear, so she resorted to fingerspelling. *"C-R-O-S-S in back."* Or at least, that's what she tried to communicate.

Nolan turned around.

Izzy stomped then glanced at Archie, but the kid didn't wake, spared from witnessing how unprepared for life his parents were. *"C-R-O-S-S the F-A-B-R-I-C behind you."*

His eyebrows lowered and he moved the fabric to his back.

Izzy dropped her head. *"No. I'm sorry, I'm not being clear. Front, then back."*

Nolan nodded and, miracles of miracles, he held the fabric in front and crossed it behind him. Izzy gestured for him to pull it over his shoulders, and he did so.

Somehow they made it through the next few steps, getting the wrap tied and set up. A little shaky, but should be sturdy enough to hold. *"Now what?"* Nolan asked.

Izzy bounced Archie. *"Now I give him to you."*

Nolan glanced down at the fabric wrapped around his body. *"How?"*

Izzy moved forward and pulled out the top part of the fabric to make room for Archie. Her fingers brushed Nolan's chest, and even that slight touch sent heat racing through her. She forced it aside and transferred Archie until he lay snuggled against his father's dress shirt.

The baby remained sleeping, and Izzy's hormones went into overdrive seeing the paternal sight before her. She quickly fixed the fabric, bringing it up and over Archie, and adjusted the straps to keep him snug. And even though she

tried not to, her hands kept brushing Nolan and she wanted to be the one strapped to him.

Did they make adult-sized baby wraps?

No, stop it, mind out of the gutter. At work he wasn't her baby's father, he was her superior, and she'd do best to act like it.

Izzy stepped back and Nolan's hands went to the baby, as if not trusting the wrap. He looked down, a note of wonder on his face. *"He's still asleep."*

"Yeah, he saves his short naps for nighttime."

Nolan frowned, but Izzy looked around. *"Where's the microphone? I can watch the video and add the voice."*

"I haven't filmed it yet. I figured I'd sign and you can speak live."

She put her hands on her hips and focused on taking a deep breath. *"You're going to film yourself while wearing a baby?"*

Nolan's gaze flickered down and he scratched his head. *"I didn't think this one through."*

Izzy shook her head. *"Nope."*

The office lights flickered and they turned to the door, where Deanna stood. *"Not fair, he gets extra baby time."* She playfully stuck out her lower lip. At least someone didn't have a problem with the baby, and this was someone a hell of a lot more important than an intern.

Still, Izzy straightened, doing her best not to react to how Nolan fit into her little family. Or how it seemed too obvious to her they were related. The last thing she needed was for Nolan's paternity to be discovered. Instead, she focused on the opportunity Deanna presented. *"Do you mind doing me a favor? We need to film a video, but..."* Her hands trailed off as she gestured to Archie.

Deanna's hands were outstretched before Izzy could explain. *"Gimme."*

Nolan watched them, then turned to the baby. *"How do I get him out?"*

Izzy chuckled and moved over, removing the straps and tension, until she was able to switch Archie back to her chest. Deanna swooped in and cuddled him close, the way one familiar with babies did.

She breathed him in. *"Oh, I miss this. Go, take care of the video. We'll be fine."* Then she walked out of the room. Izzy wanted to follow, ensure everything was okay. She liked her coworkers, most of them at least, and felt safe here, but Archie was her son and the closest to a stranger she'd had hold him was Nolan.

Still a stranger, just a blood-related one.

She hadn't realized how affected she was until a hand on her shoulder forced her to calm down. She faced Nolan. *"He'll be fine. Deanna has kids, and she's a sweetheart."*

Izzy nodded, tamping down her worries.

Nolan moved over to the wall, catching her eyes. *"Ready?"*

She took in the loose fabric draping his chest. *"I think you need to take care of that first."*

He glanced down and his shoulder shook. *"True."* He looked one way, then the other. *"How do I get out of this?"*

Izzy chuckled as she crossed the distance between them. She undid the fabric and unwound him. It should have been a simple act. But now she was close to him, no baby in the way, and the heat of him somehow crossed the distance, lingered on the fabric. She had the urge to rub her face into it to soak up a little Nolan magic.

She balled the fabric up close to her but didn't back up. His eyes found hers and she got lost in the brown depths. The temptation rose to step in to him and to find out if he tasted the same as he did when they'd been drunk. The fabric in her hands registered, the reason for it, and she took a large step back.

Nolan's Adam's apple bobbed, letting her know she wasn't the only one affected.

...

Izzy closed the door to reduce sound interference, making Nolan wonder what made it through closed doors and what did not. No time to worry about that now, they had a video to record.

He showed Izzy how to use the recording equipment and she sat nearby, ready to be the camera person and vocalize close to the microphone. Meanwhile, he faced the wall, going over his speech in his head and trying not to be affected by the beautiful woman helping him. Her presence beckoned him, calling him to her, and the closed office door did not help, not one bit. This wasn't a game, this was real life, and he couldn't act on any whim he had. Heck, acting on whims created Archie in the first place. No fantasy could exist where they did anything other than business.

Especially while at work.

Things were easier when Archie was around, a constant reminder of that night, and the failed condom, and the reason why he needed to tread very carefully with the opposite sex. Especially Izzy. But none of that mattered when she looked at him, when she smiled. He felt it seep into his bones and twist him into knots.

And now they stood in a closed room. Alone. Without the baby. How easy it would be to cross the distance between them. How wrong. He couldn't crash and burn with Izzy. They already had a permanent connection in their son.

That thought used to be a bucket of cold water, but it wasn't. Not anymore. And these thoughts helped no one.

Nolan shook out his hands and faced Izzy. He moved into position as she bent over the viewfinder to check the screen. The motion had her sticking her ass out, and he couldn't help following the curve of her back over her rear and down those long legs. Couldn't help remembering how those legs felt wrapped around him as he—

Izzy straightened, breaking him from his memories, one hand on her hip. *"You have to move a little to the right."* Only he barely saw the signs, he was too focused on her

face, on the light flush to her cheeks, on the enlarged pupils. All his blood rushed south and the thought of taking her in the room, on the floor, on his desk, the wall—he didn't care—grew stronger than rational thought.

He stepped out of his spot, heading for her. She didn't stop him, didn't question him, did nothing to bring him back to the present. Instead her tongue moistened her bottom lip and he grew hard enough to break wood. Her head tipped up as he reached her personal space, then pressed into it. The air warmed around them, as though together they created their own heat source.

Nolan brushed Izzy's hair back, tucking it behind her ear. Her skin prickled at his touch, easily seen because she tilted her head, giving him better access to her neck.

He took it, settled his hand under her hairline. Her skin soft and smooth and every bit as alluring as he remembered. Nothing about her had changed, only grown more addictive as time passed. He leaned his head down until he rested mere centimeters from her plump lips. Like that night so long ago, he made his intentions known, but left the decisions up to her.

Also like that night long ago, she didn't disappoint. Izzy shifted closer, meshing her lips with his. Fireworks damn near exploded as he pulled her close, sunk his lips to hers. Everything came to life and faded away until the only thing that mattered was Izzy back in his arms.

She tasted the same and felt the same—alcohol, time, situation, none of that mattered. He feared she'd still taste the same in ten or twenty or more years. They'd had enough time apart, had enough things happen while apart, that the magic shouldn't have been stronger.

But it was. He wanted to melt into her, take her, be a part of her again. He wanted to lay everything on the line and give it to her.

She lightened the kiss, then stepped back, outside of his grasp. Cold emptiness replaced her warmth and he

struggled to regain his thoughts, to regain the thought of why this was wrong.

He refocused on his office. Reason number one. And the green wrap of fabric that had held their child. Reason number two. Nolan ran a hand through his hair and worked at getting his breathing under control. He couldn't do a damn thing about the erection pressing against his fly.

"I'm sorry," he signed, lost and unsure.

She shook her head. *"No. Don't be. My decision, too."* Her hands shook, and he knew she felt this just as much as he did. *"But the company policy, we really can't..."* She gestured between them, the implication clear.

Shit. For a brief moment he had forgotten about the policy, letting his dick lead instead of his head. He shouldn't have done that, and she shouldn't have let him. They couldn't change this kiss, much like they couldn't change having a kid together. And none of that helped get blood flow back to his brain as it damn well should have.

"The video? Or do we need a break, fresh air, water"—a shower, sex—"first?" His libido wanted to play an entirely different and inappropriate game.

Izzy raised her head, determined chin pointing upward. *"No. I'm good. And Archie won't sleep much longer."*

Right. Archie. He shouldn't be touching her. Not here. But he wasn't sure how he'd survive the rest of the week with her in his apartment. She'd turned into an achievement he needed to unlock, and the desire would only get stronger.

Chapter Eleven

Izzy sat on the floor, playing with Archie, while Nolan cooked dinner. It had taken them several tries to get the video filmed after the kiss that threw them both off their game. Izzy hadn't expected it to be so explosive, so much better than before. If it hadn't affected Nolan, she'd have blamed her celibate self for the reaction.

It had affected him, though, and a new simmering current coursed between them. If life were different, if their jobs weren't an obstacle, they'd already be in bed together.

Archie reached forward for a toy he'd thrown, only to pause and grunt in that telltale way that said a diaper change was in her near future. Sure enough, a fart soon emitted, complete with juicy sound effects and a strong smell.

The room had been smelling good, thanks to Nolan's cooking. Not anymore.

Izzy scrunched her nose and moved to her feet, ready to get the baby taken care of. Movement from the kitchen caught her gaze, Nolan waving. *"What's wrong?"*

"Diaper change, it smells."

She expected him to go back to the kitchen, leaving her to deal with Archie alone, but when she picked up the smelly kid, Nolan stood in front of her.

Shocked, Izzy stayed rooted in her spot, bad fumes and all.

"I've never changed a diaper before. I should learn, right?"

A question lingered between the lines, almost as if he asked

for permission to change his son's diaper. Bad people aside, who wouldn't take advantage of missing a diaper change?

Izzy shifted Archie on her hip. "*You learn better observing or trying?*"

Nolan clearly got his first whiff of what their kid was capable of, and his eyes watered. He took a step back. "*I'll watch.*"

Smart man. Izzy moved into the spare bedroom, where a section of Nolan's desk had been cleared off to become a makeshift changing table. No strap or angled sides, so she had to be 100 percent present, but for a week it would suffice. "*He can roll, so be careful,*" she warned as she set Archie onto his back.

Archie stuck a foot into his mouth.

Izzy pulled his pants off and then undid the snaps of his onesie, all while Nolan stood by her shoulder. If her signing was better, or if she were speaking, she'd talk through the steps, but watching should do the trick. She pulled off the sticky sides of the diaper, letting a little air in before closing it back up; she'd had enough of Archie trying to mark the floor, the table, the ceiling, his own face, her, to not be careful. She gestured for the wipes and Nolan brought them over. In quick motions, Izzy lifted Archie by the feet, slipped the diaper out, placed that to the side, and wiped the mess away.

All while taking shallow breaths, because pureed peas did not smell good on the way out.

Once Archie was clean, she gestured for a new diaper. Nolan handed it over, and she quickly settled Archie into it and taped him back up. She fixed his onesie, pulled the pants back on, and then picked him up.

Archie clapped. Her sister joked he'd make a career out of being a motivational speaker.

Izzy handed him over to Nolan, so she could throw out the diaper and wipes and clean her hands. "*Any questions?*" she signed, careful not to let her hands touch anything before

she got them cleaned.

Nolan shook his head and, be still her heart, bounced Archie. *"Looks simple enough."*

"Not always. Try it with a squirmy baby. Messy." She collected the trash, a folder on his desk shifting in the process. A drawing of a winter scene stared back at her, with snow-covered treetops and land, animal tracks breaking up the white landscape. It had been printed, and possibly done on a computer to begin with. Izzy didn't know where it came from, but the picture was so beautiful, she wanted to hang it on the wall.

"I like that," she signed.

Nolan's cheeks turned a shade of pink. *"Thanks."*

Did she miss something? She looked back to the picture, then at him. *"You drew this?"* Ugh, she really needed to wash her hands first; she risked getting a mess all over herself.

He nodded, then shrugged, a bashfulness she hadn't seen in him before. *"I enjoy art."*

The picture claimed that to be an understatement, unless... *"So you drew this, as in used images already online or...?"*

"You think I'd steal from someone else?"

Crap. She'd stepped in it that time, no diaper on floor required. *"No, not that. I'm impressed."*

"To answer you, I started with a blank document."

"You should hang that on the wall. Or sell it."

"No selling. Art is enjoyment. That's all."

She studied his face, looking for the lie but couldn't find one. Fair enough. She dabbled in enough things to recognize sometimes a person wanted to simply explore. *"Still. Wall. Think about it."*

She threw out the diaper and washed her hands, before joining Nolan and Archie in the living room.

Hours later, after dinner was eaten and Izzy settled Archie down for the night, she found Nolan in the living room,

spread out on the couch, thumbing through his phone. She took in the space. The room was small, she'd give him that, but the lack of decorations on the wall, the simple furniture, made this place look like a cold rental. She'd had more personality in her microscopic dorm rooms.

She waved until she caught his attention. *"Did you recently move here?"*

He tossed his phone to the couch. *"Yeah, a few months ago."*

"So you haven't finished decorating?"

His face scrunched up and he took in the apartment. *"What do you mean?"*

"No pictures, no...personal things." Crap, not only was she putting her foot in her mouth, but she didn't know the signs to really express herself. *"It looks like a lonely bachelor lives here."*

Nolan dropped his head, his shoulders shaking. *"I am a bachelor."*

Izzy bit her lip. Levi had been one, too, but his place held pictures and decorations and charm. Then again, Levi had a good ten years on Nolan. *"I'm sorry, it just doesn't feel like... home."* Surely he'd want to hang up his pictures; the one she'd seen would add a lot to the space.

She had one room at her sister's home and she managed to decorate, to infuse some of her own personality. Nolan's apartment revealed nothing but a blank slate.

He looked around again. *"I haven't really settled down since college. Still figuring myself out."*

A lost soul drifting along, trying to find his footing in the world. She related to that. Having Archie meant she had to stop drifting and get her footing fast. *"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."*

He cut her off, which was good because she wasn't sure how to finish that sentence. *"It's fine."* He bent and picked up a soft toy car. *"Archie brings more color than I have."*

Izzy warmed. *"He does that. Whether you want it or not."*

Nolan placed the car on the coffee table. *"Where would you be now, if you hadn't had Archie?"*

The question threw her off. *"Why?"*

He raised a shoulder, a slight, uncomfortable action. *"Want to know how much I messed up your life."*

Sincerity shined in his gaze, and it hit her deep inside. Not that he implied Archie to be a mistake, but there existed an understanding of how much her life had changed based on one condom not working. *"Both of us created Archie."*

Nolan moved his legs, allowing her space on the couch, and she joined him, giving his question some thought, transporting herself back to where she had been before the pregnancy test said *positive*. *"Don't know. Not living with my sister. Maybe I would have visited Europe or got myself into more trouble senior year. But learning ASL? That would have continued. So maybe our paths would have still met now."*

He shifted closer, eyes on her, and the temperature in the room rose. *"And if they had?"*

She swallowed. The same magic that brought them together a year and a half ago continued to exist, and if they had met today the pull would still be there.

"Work doesn't want us doing this."

He didn't move back, didn't change the intensity in his gaze. *"Work doesn't have to know."*

She leaned forward, answering his earlier question with action. Unable to resist his allure even when she knew they shouldn't. He cupped her chin, thumb brushing over her cheek. Neither closed the distance, their eyes locked, as their chemistry swirled around them. He'd been like this even drunk, waiting for her, giving her the lead. Probably why she'd taken it.

For now she studied his face, the deep browns of his irises, the light stubble on his jaw and the way it collected in a patch under his chin in that oh-so-sexy way.

His thumb continued brushing her cheek, revving her engine more with each pass. She wanted him, no mistake

about that, she'd always wanted him. But she was nine months postpartum and still getting her body back to the way it had been.

Not that Nolan seemed to mind.

Still, she had stretch marks, she'd had her sex torn and sewn back together, and she was lactating. Her body felt different, untested, almost like the next time would be a first.

First time post-childbirth.

And that was enough to keep her from leaning forward, keep her from crossing that line. She had an IUD, jumped at the chance to get one, due to Archie being unplanned, but hadn't been sure she'd need it with her nonexistent love life. After the kiss earlier that day, she didn't know if she'd be able to put the brakes on. And she didn't know if she was ready for this, for her mom-bod to be seen and felt.

The job, her inner rule-follower admonished. She didn't always listen to this side of her, but it rang loud and clear now. She needed to care for Archie, Nolan had already stated he'd help financially, neither of them should risk their jobs.

His hand remained on her neck as his other signed, "*You're beautiful.*"

Against all her worries and concerns, she melted. "*My body's not normal.*" Dammit, she really needed more ASL, or to use her phone, in order to properly express herself. Or, heck, listen to her internal rule-follower and put a stop to this.

His eyes raked a slow path up and down her body and she intentionally pulled her stomach in. His lips curved. "*Looks good to me.*" In contrast to his words, he leaned back. "*But this is up to you. I want you. I can wait.*"

Damn, damn, *damn*. Had his college had a class on how to get panties to melt, because Nolan had all the right words. And yet she didn't think him to be a player. Players didn't exactly invite their former one-night-stand-turned-baby-

momma and kid over for the week at the drop of a hat.

"You don't have a girlfriend?"

Now the smile turned full. *"No."* Those eyes, they didn't dart away, barely blinked. *"There's been no one since you."*

Poof, there went her panties. How could this be? Pregnancy had pretty much killed her social life and her desire for one. But his? *"Why?"*

His smile fell and he ran a hand through his hair. *"I tend to mess things up. Not a whole lot of surprise the condom failed. Sorry for my karma."*

That made it twice he'd referred to himself in this manner. *"Why do you think that?"* Was it his upbringing? His parents? What created this lack of self-esteem? Other times he had confidence and charm but here, behind closed doors, the vulnerability underneath seeped out.

"History. You and Archie better be careful. Even my sign name is due to a science fair debacle."

He had a string of rotten luck, perhaps, and situations blown out of proportion. But the man in front of her wasn't a mess-up. *"Archie and I will take our chances."*

He cringed. *"I don't want to disappoint you."*

"Archie deserves to know his father. Mine died. Time is precious."

"I'm sorry. I don't know mine. He was never involved."

She rose onto her knees. *"So be different for your son. A mess-up is fine. Better than nothing."*

Nolan no longer met her eyes and she knew this issue stemmed deep, not something she could solve in a few minutes with her limited ASL. She shifted closer, until her knees met his thigh. *"You're not a mess-up. Not to me."* Maybe it was the pain so clearly emanating from him, maybe it was the closeness or just him, but she closed the distance between them, pressing her lips to his.

The magic returned.

He kissed her back, wrapping an arm around her until she ended up straddling him, both hands on his face, kissing

him with everything she had. She'd never been able to kiss him with anything less. The taste of his lips, the scratch of his stubble, it called to her from a place deep down inside.

His hands went to her hips, gripping the fabric there. She wanted to purr and settle against him, but her breasts ached either from arousal or milk production, and she felt it impossible to differentiate between the two. That small sensation reminded her of her body, of the changes. And though she'd never been a lights-out sex person before, she wondered if she'd ever get back to being comfortable with her body.

Nolan didn't sense the turmoil going through her, how could he with her tongue defying her doubts and licking insistently at his lips? His hands released the fabric and began to roam up and down her side, inching closer and closer to her engorged breasts.

She needed to pull back and stop him or decide if she wanted to let him touch her oversensitive and achy chest. A part of her screamed, "Hands off the milk-makers!" but the part of her that had no willpower against him urged her forward.

As if he sensed her internal conflict, he settled his hands on her waist, lightening the kiss to slight intoxicating passes, rather than full-on intoxicating claims, until he pulled back. Lost in lust and confusion, she blinked at him.

"You stiffened. What's wrong?"

Had she? Apparently the hands-off-the-milk-makers won this round. She fumbled, unsure how to express herself. She had discussed breastfeeding and milk only with Gaby and the lactation consultants. She pointed to her chest. *"Sensitive. Sometimes painful."*

"So bad sensitive."

"Yes." Though she wondered, could it be good sensitive? Overly heightened sensations? Or would it be too much? Clearly this man already had her wrapped up into a coil with a touch. If he really touched her, she'd probably orgasm on

the spot.

Tempting.

Nolan's hands moved to her arms, gave a quick reassuring rub. "*O.K. We take it slow. You let me know what you're ready for.*" He glanced around, as if coming back from a daze. "*If we should be doing this at all.*"

The sexual fog cleared. "*No, we shouldn't be doing this. I want to, but Archie comes first, and for him I need this job.*"

He nodded, though the heat remained in his eyes, threatening to break her resolve. "*Go. Take the bedroom.*"

She blinked, confused, until her gaze slipped and she found the bulge in his pants. Her mouth watered and the battle inside flipped, the other side winning now.

A finger under her chin forced her gaze to his. His eyes were hungry and dark. "*Go.*"

She swallowed and obeyed. Because the battle inside her still raged, and he knew it. Just as they both knew they needed to stay apart.

But as she lay in his bed, under his sheets, her sensitized skin could think only of being there with him and dreaming of a different scenario where they could be together.

Chapter Twelve

Nolan woke to find Izzy at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in front of her and a sleeping baby on her shoulder.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he rounded the table. Izzy's messy bun showed her hand holding her head up, then her face came into view. Izzy's closed eyes and slow breaths may as well have punched him in the stomach. Archie wasn't the only one asleep. He blinked in the scene, clearly having missed a lot during the night. Why hadn't she woken him?

Probably because he admitted to being a screw-up and continued to be clueless on childcare. But he couldn't let her stay like that. He moved to them, studying them like a complex puzzle. There had to be a way to get Archie off her hands without waking either of them. He studied where Izzy's arms were, and Archie's, and figured if he picked the baby up from the armpits, it could work.

Nolan moved forward, in stealth mode, and slipped his hands along the baby's sides. He lifted in an awkward fumble and turned the kid around until Archie lay on his shoulder instead, somehow managing without breaking the kid.

Archie stayed asleep, light puffs of baby breath grazing Nolan's cheek.

Izzy stayed asleep as well. Mission accomplished. Only her position couldn't be comfortable and she no longer had to stay like that.

He tapped her shoulder and she jolted awake, eyes wide in an instant, taking in him and Archie. *"What happened?"*

Izzy yawned and stretched. His gaze followed the smooth column of her neck, down over the curve of her breasts, and his morning wood lost the morning reason. He cursed himself for how that simple act affected him, when she was dead tired and more than likely in pain from sleeping in that position. *"Teething. I think. Long night."*

He frowned. *"Why didn't you wake me?"*

Izzy stared at him. *"I'm tired, this will sound rude, but I'm a single mother. I'm not used to asking for help."*

He swallowed the hurt, knowing he had no right with all she'd done on her own. *"I'm here. I'm responsible. I can't hear Archie cry, but you can wake me."* He needed to get his hands on a baby cry alarm as soon as possible.

Izzy nodded, but he knew he'd need to do more than that to get her to believe him. *"You have Archie? I need to shower."*

"You need to sleep."

She glanced at the stove clock. *"No time. We have work."* She hurried on when he tried to sign. *"And neither of us has sick days yet."*

She tried to escape, but he caught her arm. She faced him and he let precious seconds tick past, counted by the baby breaths on his neck, needing this moment, this connection. When he knew she wouldn't flee, he released her and brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. The air molecules changed between them, her breaths kicking up, making it damn near impossible not to drop his gaze to her chest.

Not what she needed. *"You need to wake me tonight. Promise me you will."*

Izzy swallowed and he lost his battle of keeping his gaze on her face, transferring to her neck and the pulse point he wanted his tongue on.

"I can't promise when I've been doing this alone for nine

months, but I'll try." Without giving him a chance to respond, she headed down the hall.

It took a few moments for him to regain movement. He adjusted himself, then focused on the kid, mind racing on how to handle all these new responsibilities and how to care for Izzy. He had to find some way to earn her trust and take control where he could.

Nolan moved to the couch and grabbed his phone before collapsing. Archie continued to puff air against his cheek, and Nolan rubbed Archie's little back, heart constricting for some reason. He ignored his emails and social media notifications, going straight to the search engine for baby monitors, ones that would wake him.

...

Izzy kept her phone nearby as she worked, since Archie played in Nolan's office, just in case she was needed. Her phone vibrated and she reached for it, but the message that came through wasn't from Nolan.

Gaby: How's it going? It's Tuesday and you haven't updated me on the baby daddy situation.

Izzy tapped her fingers on her desk, debating how much to get into. Torn between her sleepless night and making out with Nolan, not to mention how even being bone-tired she still wanted to jump him this morning. She needed to push her desires away, far away. A yawn forced her jaw open and watered her eyes.

Izzy: Tired. Another typical Archie night where he demonstrated his lung capacity.

Gaby: Deaf men don't hear babies cry. I can't tell you how often Archie's woken me and Levi's slept peacefully next to me. But Levi's not the father.

Izzy: I know. I know. Nolan told me this morning to wake

him. But I never even woke you, intentionally. Why would I wake Nolan?

Gaby: *BECAUSE HE'S THE FATHER!*

Izzy set her phone on the table, then quickly flipped it over in case Lisa glanced over. She knew her sister was right. And yet. She took a breath and replied.

Izzy: *I've been doing this on my own since the start. You've helped only when you forced your way in.*

Gaby: *So give me Nolan's number and I'll tell him to force his way in. You don't have to do this on your own anymore. If he's willing to take responsibility, give it to him.*

Izzy: *Is it what's best for Archie?*

Gaby: *Are you worried? If you don't feel Nolan will be good to Archie, then get back to my home and we'll be there soon. But if you trust him, then you need to trust him.*

Izzy bit her lip. Thought of Nolan's kisses, of the way he bounced Archie, of how present he was. Her gut knew the answer.

Izzy: *I trust him.*

Gaby: *Good. That's a start. You're lucky. You had a one-night-stand, this guy could have been anyone, good or bad.*

Truth. Izzy often wondered what she'd gotten into. But the only worries she had about Nolan involved herself and her self-control.

Izzy: *I know. How's Maine?*

Gaby: *Good. Levi's family is thrilled we're thinking of having the wedding up here.*

Izzy: *And?*

Gaby: *We found a potential place. Have another to tour before we make our decision. Think my nephew will be up for the ring bearer position?*

Izzy smiled and thought of Archie in a cute little tux. Then of him drooling all over said tux.

Izzy: *Depends on his teething, he might swallow the rings.*

Gaby: *LOL! Never a dull moment. We'll figure that out when we get there. Looking at next year, he's got time to grow. And you'll be a bridesmaid?*

Izzy warmed at the words.

Izzy: *Of course.*

Gaby: *Good. Now, tell me. Spark still there?*

Spark? More like an irresistible chemical reaction that threatened to melt her every time he looked at her. And damn her sister for guessing this so easily. She and Gaby had some rough years, getting on each other's nerves the way siblings do. But Izzy couldn't have gotten through pregnancy and the past nine months without her.

Izzy: *Spark is still there.*

Gaby: *So you've got time to figure out if you'll need a plus one.*

Izzy put her head on her keyboard and prayed she wasn't inadvertently tweeting gibberish on the agency account.

Gaby: *Another reason to trust him. It's not just you, it's you and Archie. And you two deserve someone who will love you both.*

Izzy: *Jumping the gun much?*

Gaby: *Sorry. Weddings on my mind.*

Izzy: *Well, cancel that and your plus one. The agency*

has a no-dating clause, they don't even know Nolan's the father and it's going to stay that way.

Izzy put her phone aside and deleted the half started tweet her head bang had created. She gave herself a foolish moment to envision it, bringing Nolan to Gaby's wedding. She'd be busy with the bride and he could watch Archie until the aisle walking. They'd dance and laugh and juggle the child-watching together. Then head home and make a little magic of their own.

A sudden happy family. A family they were destined not to become.

Her mind conjured up that day nearly a decade ago, when she'd gotten off the bus to find out her father had been taken to the hospital. Her whole world turned upside down that week. Happiness didn't last forever. The future wasn't a given.

If she wanted something, she needed to grab onto it with both hands.

And right now, she wanted Nolan. It had taken her too long to find this job, she knew the pickings were slim and the reality of finding something else in a timely manner not possible. She could look, keep her options open. And those options included Nolan, because if he fit into her little family, that would be for longer than a job.

A chair scraped and Izzy's daydream burst as Lisa stood abruptly and waltzed out of the area, blonde ponytail swaying like a woman on a mission. Izzy had a moment of panic. Had she said something out loud? No, of course not. Did Lisa see something? No, her phone displayed nothing. And yet the reminder that she might be breaking a workspace rule wormed its way under her skin.

Those images were a fantasy. She couldn't have Nolan and keep her job. Her life didn't work that way.

...

Something soft and drool-covered hit Nolan's arm. He glanced at the spot, flashbacks to school bullies filtering in, then over at the infant on the floor. Clapping.

"Either you're a bully in the making, or we need to sign you up for sports. Baseball, football? Which do you prefer?"

Archie clapped some more, hands moving in babble signs. Nolan figured he'd babble with his voice, but his mouth didn't move, only hands damn near close to actual signs.

"I don't think they've created that sport yet."

Archie babbled some more, wide grin producing a string of drool on the side.

"Really." He picked up the slimy car that had pummeled him. *"Want?"*

Archie reached both hands out, using that sign that meant milk and want to him. Nolan moved out from behind his desk, getting close enough to do a soft underhand toss. Archie didn't catch it, but he made a noble attempt. The car landed in his lap and he picked it up and shoved it in his mouth.

Nolan sat in front of him. *"Teeth hurt, huh kid?"*

Archie chomped harder on the car, and Nolan wiped the drool off his chin. He should contact his mother, figure out some teething tricks, but the monitor held more importance.

Nolan returned to his computer and the multiple browsers open. He found a baby monitor that worked best for him, combined visual and tech savvy features. With an expected arrival date range that would likely miss Izzy staying with him.

Other options he could get sooner, even overnight, but he'd be settling. Yes, he needed something now, but he had no plans of walking away from Archie. He needed something long-term, not a partial bandage fix that would stop being effective a few weeks in. And no way in hell would anything in local stores work for the deaf.

He needed something foolproof so that Izzy could sleep, especially if he ever watched Archie alone.

That made up his mind and he placed the order for his first option, crossing his fingers that the shipment would arrive earlier than expected.

He closed down the nonwork-related browsers and got back to his presentation for Thursday. He had the captioning set up to match his signs, he just needed Izzy to tweak it and make sure it followed the audio as well. But he had more ideas, and even though one video sufficed for the meeting, he couldn't let the other ideas rest. Which meant talking to his coworkers about their programs and what information needed the highest priority.

Nolan stood, ready to have that conversation, only to stop at the door and turn to Archie. Right. He had the kid. Either he needed to take Archie with him or wait for the switch with Izzy.

What would Izzy do? He checked the diaper bag, searching for the fabric wrap Izzy had, and pulled it out. Archie looked up as Nolan held out the material, trying to remember how the hell to set it up. He found the center, crossed the fabric around him and ended up looking like a drawing done by the kid. Archie clapped and reached for him.

"Not yet, kid, I don't think this will hold you."

He undid the fabric, getting his arm caught at one point because he really did mess up the steps. The wrap eventually untangled and he shoved the fabric magic trick back into the bag—he'd figure that out another day. On to plan B. He picked up the baby and plopped him on his hip before grabbing a notebook and heading out to make the rounds and build his upcoming video list.

The first office was empty. The second wanted to interact with Archie more than give Nolan what he needed.

"You're so sweet to watch him," Arianna signed, then proceeded to baby sign to Archie, who babbled right back. *"I got to play with him in Deanna's office the other day, such a love."*

Nolan forced a grin. It wasn't sweet, it was his duty, but no

one at work knew his paternity and it needed to stay that way. *"He's a good kid."*

Arianna fanned her face. *"You keep that up and you'll have a long line of potential suitors at your door."*

The smile threatened to crack. As though stepping in to care for a child made him worthy of some award. It didn't.

Especially when everyone found out he was the father.

He managed to get Arianna to give him a few ideas for her program before heading down the hall for the next office. Only Archie lurched and he had to drop his notebook to catch the kid before he fell. The baby fussed, hands outstretched, signing, *"Want."*

"What do you want?" he asked.

Archie remained fixated forward and Nolan followed the path, right to Izzy's desk. *"You want Mommy?"*

Archie signed again, and this time Nolan realized the correct sign: *"Milk."*

Archie squirmed until Nolan had to put him down or drop him. He set the kid on his feet, and Archie stood, one hand clutched in Nolan's, tears threatening to fall. Nolan moved his other hand to the baby, and he grasped on, then stomped one foot in front of the other, a baby power walk to his mother.

Izzy looked up as they rounded the corner, a huge smile breaking out over her face. *"My boy is walking! Look at you!"*

Nolan wanted the smile to be for him and also wanted to kick himself in the ass for that thought.

When they got close enough, Archie switched his hold from Nolan to Izzy's knee, signing, *"Milk."*

"You hungry, sweetie?"

Archie bounced, a surefire yes if Nolan ever saw one. And then, without moving to his office or the closet converted for her to pump, Izzy reached under her shirt and positioned Archie on her lap. Nolan got a split-second glimpse of nipple before the baby latched on.

He'd seen Izzy breastfeed at his apartment; it had been a natural and comfortable thing. Here, in the office, he felt awkward and unsure of himself, of his presence during the moment. He backed up.

"I should get the papers I dropped." He thumbed behind him, then turned, ramming right into a neighboring desk. Dick first.

Nolan swallowed the pain and did his best not to limp once he managed to move. The floor vibrated beneath his feet. He turned, even though he much preferred sulking away.

"You O.K.?" Izzy's lips had a slight curve to them, though he gave her props, she managed to not full-out laugh at him like others would.

"I'm fine." He might grab some ice, but he'd live.

"Can you do me a favor? My nursing cover is in your office. It's the fabric with blue background and green swirls. I prefer to cover in a public space."

Nolan nodded and headed away, limping only once.

He collected his dropped items, his mind wandering to Izzy. He wanted to join her as she nursed, to chat with her about work or not work or whether she thought the Red Sox would win the next World Series. The Izzy he met a year and a half ago had intrigued him and left him wanting more, but he didn't know that person. He was starting to get glimpses of who she really was and he liked her, more than he should.

He shook his head. His job and her job, anything more than friends would be wrong. Karma really hated him. It had taken a year and a half to find her and now that he did, he couldn't have her. Didn't change the want, the need. And he didn't know how he'd manage to resist her allure.

They'd crossed the line with having Archie in the first place, so maybe they could keep it quiet, like they kept his paternity quiet. Sneaking around had never been his thing, but he'd do it for Archie, he'd do it for Izzy. If she wanted him to.

Nolan found the nursing cover and returned it to Izzy, no

longer trying to ignore the current that bubbled between them.

Chapter Thirteen

Izzy finished settling Archie into his crib for the night, his eyelids already drooping. Good. She needed some baby-free moments, especially when her thoughts kept straying to Nolan, and not the PG kind. She clicked off the light and stayed in the hall, catching the man who dominated her attention in the living room, on his phone. The lamp next to him cast half his face in a shadow, making him look mysterious and sexy.

She had it bad. Always had when it came to this man.

Her conscience warned her not to enter the living room, told her to go to bed alone. Risking her job wasn't worth it. But she and Nolan weren't an if; they were a when. If they already risked their jobs due to Archie's existence, should she have this second moment with him?

Thoughts of her changed body tried to infiltrate her consciousness, but she beat them aside. She'd always have reasons for the worries. She was a mother now. Whether she took this leap now or later wouldn't change the fact she'd changed.

And Nolan still wanted her like he had before.

Her body practically hummed with that thought, and now her fears morphed to a new one. What if she went off the moment he touched her?

She sauntered into the living room, but his focus remained on his phone. She needed a bold act to make this work. Or an obvious one. Or a really fast one before she went back to

the shower for a little self-care.

Nolan glanced up, as if hearing her thoughts. He set his phone down, attention now solely on her. *"Archie O.K.?"*

She nodded, nerves taking over as though this was her very first time, and she wanted to smack herself. *Take what you want, Izzy, it's here for the taking.*

At that, she walked over to him and straddled his lap. Nolan's eyes darkened as she slid over him, his hungry gaze eating her up. She liked the feel and promise of that reaction, craved more of it. His hands gripped her hips, roaming straight up to her shoulders. That simple touch and she nearly purred and rolled over to expose her belly. *"I want you."*

His lips curved up and his fingers trailed down her arms, leaving goose bumps, before he signed, *"Same. What do you want?"*

She bit her lip and his eyes became black orbs of desire. *"Everything."*

He didn't move, though his Adam's apple bounced. *"Really?"*

She didn't want the questions, didn't want doubt to slither back in and ruin the moment. She shifted against him, their bodies colliding, until his eyes flickered and the pulse point at his neck intensified. *"Yes."*

Nolan kissed her then. Not soft, not gentle. Hard enough that the entire year and a half they'd been apart faded and all concerns vanished. Everything in her tightened and released at once, bringing her closer and closer to that cliff, when they'd done next to nothing yet.

Goodness.

His hands roamed her back, a tame action that contrasted with what his lips were doing. Until he pulled back. *"Define 'everything,' because last night your breasts were a bad sensitive."*

Were they still? She didn't know, could barely form any thought that didn't involve him touching her, kissing her,

fucking her. *"I don't know. Want to try, but I'm afraid if you touch me, I'll explode."* Wrong sign. Dammit. Why didn't they teach sex ed ASL?

Nolan's grin turned naughty bad boy, and a tiny tremor waved through her. *"Really? You'll explode?"* The innuendo with his sign was clear as day and another tremor followed the first.

She nodded, her hands gripping his shirt, shaking with need and unable to sign.

He kissed her, easing her back until she lay on the couch, with him between her legs. She lost herself in his lips, in his tongue, her body climbing so fast she would have gotten lightheaded if she wasn't lying down.

His hands started at her waist, trailing a slow path upward. He broke the kiss—she whimpered at the loss, didn't matter he couldn't hear her—and rested one hand just below her aching breast. *"Let me know if yay or nay."*

Then his other hand fluttered up her breast, brushing against her nipple, and all her nerve endings fled to a happy place. Her sensitive skin took the pleasure and multiplied it, bringing her to the start of the roller coaster, ready to fly down the hill.

When his hand stopped, she popped her eyes open, ready to scream for more.

"You O.K.?" he asked. She realized he didn't know he'd nearly set her off, he was too wrapped up in making sure she'd be okay, and her heart joined in on the emotional overload.

She nodded. *"Yes. Good. Better. More."* Look at her, a whole four words.

His Cheshire grin came back, and then his lips were on hers and his hand was back on her breast and the combination detonated every enjoyable cell in her body. She clutched him, riding the wave, until she lay boneless and happy.

But not sated.

"So you do like that," he signed and she was too content to fight him.

"Yes. Thank you."

He grinned and shifted to give her room, adjusting himself. She blinked, her lust-filled brain taking a few moments to catch up. He thought they were finished.

"We're not done."

He paused. *"We're not?"*

She shook her head, and stood, holding out her hand. Her knees wobbled a bit, but when he placed his hand in hers, his strength traveled through, filling her up as though more than their hands touched. She led them both to his bedroom, aware of his presence behind her, where more of that delicious strength resided. The harsh lighting filled the room, emphasized the bed, and Izzy wished he had a dimmer option somewhere. Until her wound-up hormones reminded her she'd be able to see all of his glorious body.

She closed the door, then thought better of it and left it open. Archie wasn't climbing out of his crib just yet, and she wanted to ensure she'd hear him if he needed her.

Nolan took in the door and a bit of the heat faded. *"You sure? We seem to have created a baby last time."*

Yes, she was well aware of that fact. *"I have an IUD."*

His eyebrows lowered. How the hell would she explain this with her limited ASL and not completely kill the mood?

"Condom plus IUD means less chance of pregnancy."

"Less?"

Izzy raised a shoulder. *"Always a risk. But less than one percent."*

He didn't seem convinced.

"The only other option is not to have sex." She sucked in a breath, praying he wouldn't take that option. *Door number one, not door number two!*

His gaze was still hot on hers, the pulse in his neck begging for her lips. *"You feel confident?"*

Fake it until you make it. *"I want sex in my life."* Sex that

involved intercourse. *"And I know your name now and where you live."* She smirked.

The hesitance faded from his face, the statue melting away as he stepped closer to her. *"I want you in my life."* And before she could finish processing the signs, he yanked her in for a hard kiss, melting her bones. She clutched his shoulders, wanting to climb him like a tree and settle her aching core against him. She hardly recognized herself and the need driving her forward.

She wrapped her legs around him, his erection rubbing against her sensitive center, and she nearly orgasmed again. All her worries and fears left her. He knew her concerns, and he still wanted her.

Nolan walked them to the bed and lowered her down, no harsh fumbling movements like the last time. He took care and she knew it would be only about her if she didn't do something.

On his bed, she unwound her legs and ran a hand down his chest. Same hard muscles she remembered, same alluring man. She clutched the latch on his pants, and Nolan's head dropped forward. Izzy flicked open the button and wrapped her hands around his hard length.

His warm, smooth skin made her mouth water. His breaths became ragged and it filled her with power. She stroked him, fumbling at her angle, but he didn't seem to care. She wanted more.

Izzy tried to wiggle his pants down, but Nolan caught her arm, halting her action. He held her gaze, a world of emotion swimming in those brown eyes. And then, with no prompting, he pulled his shirt off.

She was pretty sure she drooled. And her insecurity demon wanted to complain that her body no longer looked fit like his. She shut it down. Her body looked different because of him, and he'd given her no reason to think he'd be disappointed with this new version of her.

Still, she held her breath when he removed her shirt,

sucking in her stomach, aware of the stretch marks near her belly button. But no heat drained from his eyes. His fingers danced up her stomach, to her breasts, and all her concerns evaporated.

Every place he touched left behind a trail of fire, nothing uncomfortable like she feared. She kissed him again, with his fingers rubbing her nipple, and her body gave another mini quake. His lips trailed down her neck, stopping at the edge of her nursing bra. He lifted his head. *"Can I taste you?"*

Oh, how she wanted him to. But hands-off-the-milk-makers reared its head, and Izzy honestly didn't know if she'd be able to continue breastfeeding if she had recent memories of Nolan sucking on her. She shook her head.

He didn't react, simply slipped down to her exposed skin below her bra, kissing to her navel, giving her the same adoration he had the first time.

She wasn't sure if she wanted to cry or orgasm again.

Then he undid her pants, and even though more stretch marks and flab awaited him, she let him. The lights were on, but he made her feel sexy and safe, especially as his heated gaze roamed over her body; the only reaction he gave was a lick of his lips.

She quaked again, her entire body hovering on the edge of the cliff, wanting to dive over in one grand celebration. She pointed at his pants, her hands shaking. *"I want you. Now."*

He grinned, but she caught the slight shake in his hands as he removed his pants, and then promptly forgot about it when he popped free. She rose to her knees, determined to take him in her mouth. He put up a hand.

"If you do that I'll come in your mouth. And I don't want that for tonight."

She nodded, noting they were in similar predicaments. And it made the moment more special, more connected. He rolled on a condom, and she lay down as he crawled over her, praying this didn't feel too different after giving birth.

Nolan brushed a damp piece of hair off her forehead. *"You O.K.?"*

She bit her lip but nodded. He arched a brow. *"Little nervous."*

He dropped his forehead to hers and they shared a breath. *"Same. Let me know if I hurt you or need to stop."*

And then he pushed inside and those little quakes soared in, building steam. No pain, no discomfort, just 100 percent pleasure. He seated himself fully inside her and stopped moving. Eyes on her, watching. She forced one hand to release its grip from his shoulder. *"I'm good. More please."*

His lips tilted in a heated smile and her body climbed higher without him doing a damn thing. Then he pulled back and pushed in, the orgasm rumbling and rolling through her, taking her over, filling and building her until nothing else in the world mattered except the two of them and how they felt.

And when that blissful wave passed another came along, and another, until Izzy could no longer keep track, could only match Nolan's pace and ride it out.

She finally settled, running her hands up and down his back, body still humming. She trailed a hand down to his ass and squeezed, and Nolan pushed in one last time, grunting his release, before resting his head on her shoulder.

Their breaths dueled for control. That had been the single best sex of her life. Nolan lifted his head, eyes dark and intense, as though seeing into her very soul. And she realized why it had been so great, because emotion had come into play.

They weren't strangers anymore. They had evolved into something more, something stronger. And she didn't know what that meant beyond this moment.

Chapter Fourteen

Nolan held Izzy as she fell asleep, tracing the curve of her cheek, the bump on her nose, not wanting to take his eyes off her. He needed to commit her to memory, find a way to preserve all her beauty, the essence that filled him with a shocking ray of light. The urge to draw her welled inside, even if his drawing materials were in the spare bedroom where Archie slept. The sex had been mind-blowing, amazing, and he knew it had nothing to do with his year and a half of celibacy. It had to do with Izzy.

Either he got her and her body like he got no other, or she somehow gave him a skill he lacked in other areas. In the end, it didn't matter. Only that she matched him.

And that held a whole other can of worms. She matched him and they had a kid sleeping in the next room. They were a family. They could either continue to match and become what he never thought he'd have—a partner and child—or they could grow to be more dysfunctional than his own parents and deal with ugly child custody fights.

The thought made his stomach curdle, and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, the simple motion soothing him.

He pushed his jumbled thoughts aside as her slow, steady breaths skittered across his chest. She was asleep. He knew she'd gotten little the night before, and who knew how many nights before that. But now she was relaxed, and he wanted to do whatever the hell he could to keep her that way.

Which led to more dangerous thoughts... He wanted to

keep her. And Archie. Not like a caveman—he wasn't a caveman, even if they both made him want to beat his chest and stomp and scare away all other suitors—but in an “I want to share my life with you because you make everything brighter” sense.

Nolan shoved a hand through his hair. Way too deep thoughts; he was rushing things, as usual. Considering their jobs, there wasn't anything to rush.

That doused his fire; nothing like a reality check to realign his wayward thoughts. An unsettled vibe ran through him, and he needed to move and do something. He carefully slid out from under Izzy and held his breath as she snuggled into the pillow, staying asleep. Before now this place had been where he slept, nothing more, nothing less. Now he saw the color and vitality she added to an otherwise drab room, making it clear what everyone had pointed out. And she did that with her essence and a few colorful items of clothing scattered about. He covered her with the blankets and got dressed before leaving the room, needing to clear his head before he started envisioning how Izzy would decorate the entire place if he let her.

Nolan slipped down the hall to Archie's room, inching the partially closed door open to check on him. Light cascaded over the crib, where Archie had a hand shoved into his mouth and shifted back and forth.

Not peacefully sleeping. Not for the teething baby.

He searched for the pacifier and found it wedged into the side like last time. Only he couldn't pop it into Archie's mouth, not with his little hand already there. The squirming increased, head rolling side to side, fist going farther into his mouth.

Crap, the kid was going to dislocate his jaw. Or win some records.

Without thinking, Nolan picked him up and settled him onto his shoulder. Chest to chest, he felt the vibrations of fussing and knew he'd need to think fast in order for Izzy to

remain asleep.

Nolan popped the pacifier into Archie's mouth, and wide dark eyes darted up to him, blinking. But thankfully not crying.

"You should be asleep," Nolan signed.

Archie kicked, then the chin started quivering.

Fuck.

"What's wrong?"

More quivering. But Archie didn't sign for milk, and Nolan figured that either meant teeth or diaper.

He hadn't had to do a diaper change on his own yet. *"You need your diaper changed?"*

Archie kicked some more, no quivering chin. *Could be coincidence.* Nolan raised the baby until his butt was nose level, and immediately pulled back at the eye-watering smell.

Double fuck.

Time to man up, Holtzman.

He flicked on the light and moved to the table, aware of the open ledge. He settled Archie onto his back and stared at the sack covering most of the kid. No sleeves, some sort of bean sack thing for kids.

What happened to blankets?

Nolan unzipped and started to take Archie's arms out, then thought better of it and put the arm back in. The frequent pacifier sucking stopped, and Archie gave him a look. *"Yes, I know. Your father is a screw-up. I don't know what I'm doing."* That seemed to placate the baby and he resumed sucking.

Nolan got the feet out from the sack, grateful to find only a onesie underneath. He undid the snaps and raised the fabric before eyeing the full diaper.

Archie had spat out the pacifier and now had his toes in his mouth. No sign of distress. *"You trust me with this?"*

Archie fit another toe in.

"We really need your jaw examined."

He undid the diaper straps, pulled it back, and promptly turned and gagged. And he thought the smell was bad earlier. Knowing he had to deal, he sucked in a breath and went back to work, claiming the foot back from Archie to raise his bum and remove the diaper.

Step one accomplished.

Only now he fumbled around, having not gathered all the supplies ahead of time. The wipes were to his left, diapers just beyond, and if he stretched he could keep one hand on the baby and gather his supplies.

Nolan shifted his stance and, reaching for the wipes, he stretched a little farther and collected them, then grabbed the fresh diaper with the tip of his fingers.

Point Holtzman.

He fixed himself back at Archie and pulled out a wipe, pausing as he assessed the poo-covered rear. The same rear he hadn't kept in the air while getting the supplies, that now left streaks on the sleeping sack.

Point lost.

"You don't need that to sleep, right?"

Archie had both hands wedged at the corners of his mouth.

Nolan used the wipe to clean him up. Then a second, and a third, trying to get all the dirty parts. Then a fourth, just because.

Baby clean, he shifted the dirty sack aside, settled Archie down, and reached for the diapers. Something wet hit his cheek, and kept hitting, sliding down his neck.

Nolan swallowed, not moving as the wetness continued, and continued, and he questioned every life decision he ever made. The onslaught finally stopped, but he didn't for a moment believe it wouldn't start up again. He used a wipe to clean himself and Archie, then quickly put a new diaper on before the kid got any more ideas. With luck, he managed to get it on securely. He removed Archie's arms from the sack and picked the baby up.

Archie clapped.

"You're just proud you marked me."

He tossed the dirty items in the trash and laundry, respectively, then set Archie into the crib. The baby stood and the watery eyes told Nolan this wasn't going to end well.

"I need to wash my hands."

Archie rocked against the railing, probably making noise now, and Nolan couldn't have it. He picked up Archie, brought him to the bathroom, and set him on the floor to quickly wash his hands. And his neck. Noticing the wet spots on his shirt, he pulled it over his head and tossed it in the corner.

By the time he looked down he managed to catch the second before Archie chomped hard on his big toe. Swallowing his pain—how the hell did Izzy breastfeed this beast?—he picked up the kid. *"No."* Then went back to the spare room, grabbed the pacifier, and popped it into the raptor's mouth.

Archie rested his head on Nolan's shoulder. Nolan contemplated a beer. He wanted to put the kid down, but clearly that wasn't happening. And even though he was now exhausted and ready for sleep, he moved into the living room, lying down on the couch, with Archie on his chest.

No wonder Izzy was tired. He'd barely been up with this kid one night and wasn't sure how much he could continue, and Izzy had done this nearly a year.

Then Archie reached over to the hand Nolan had on his chest and squeezed his finger, turning something deep inside. In that moment Nolan knew he'd do anything for this kid.

With his free hand he rubbed Archie's little back as the baby stared up at him with wide eyes. *"You want a story."* Archie continued to stare, sucking on the pacifier like it was his drug of choice. Nolan thought back to his childhood and signed *The Three Little Pigs*, claiming back his other hand to

do so. Time for a little story time, ASL style.

Chapter Fifteen

Izzy woke up to morning light filtering into the room. Still in happy sleep mode, she stretched, body relaxed and loose. And then everything hit at once—she slept through the night, she had sex with Nolan, *she slept through the night*, where was Archie? Where was Nolan? And why was she wet?

Izzy shifted. She wore only her nursing bra, because neither of them had managed to get it off before sex and she was too sated to care after. But now the fabric was drenched in breast milk, leaking onto the sheets, and her engorged breasts were clearly not a fan of a good night's sleep.

Izzy pushed herself up, worry creeping in and needing to check on Archie. She took off her bra, pulled on a shirt and pants, and even though her tender breasts hurt to hang free, headed off to Archie's room.

To find it empty.

Panic welled and seized her lungs, but she steadied herself and turned to the living room. One glance had her lungs back to normal. On the couch lay Nolan, one arm above his head, the other holding Archie, who slept facedown on Nolan's chest, one arm also above his head.

They really looked like a father and son and even though she knew the dangers of such a sleeping position, she also knew both were breathing.

She checked. Twice.

Izzy grabbed her phone, turned off the flash, and angled her phone to get the best composition before snapping a

picture of them. Amateur photography, another of her random skills, one that had become more than useful since Archie's birth. She checked on the captured photo, noting it looked good, damn good. The fact that Nolan was shirtless just made it better.

But Archie had to be hungry. Nolan couldn't have fed him, because she hadn't been pumping since they came to stay with him, so there was no extra milk available. She moved over to the sleeping pair. Slow and gentle, she removed Nolan's arm and picked up the baby.

Archie squirmed and probably smelled Izzy's milk, because his mouth started moving before he even woke up. Not giving him a chance to fuss, Izzy sat at the edge of the couch and set him to nursing. Archie latched on right away, the milk let-down a relief. And two little eyes popped open to see her.

"Good morning," she said and signed, brushing a hand over Archie's cheek.

Stirring beside her caught her attention, and Nolan woke with a start, sitting up, hand on his chest, blinking at her. It took a few seconds, but he relaxed. *"You have the baby."*

She nodded. *"He's hungry, why didn't you wake me?"*

Nolan yawned, arms stretching wide, accentuating his toned frame. *"You needed your sleep. And he never signed for milk. I think it's his teething."*

"Yeah, he's had a rough time."

Nolan leaned forward and rubbed Archie's head, then he stood and stretched some more, and Izzy fought not to drool on the nursing baby. *"You need anything?"*

She needed the bathroom, but baby came first. *"No."*

"I'll make some coffee."

He moved into the kitchen and she watched, still fascinated by the way his body moved. Another domestic moment, just a happy, tired family on another typical morning. And after sex and a good night's sleep, Izzy didn't know how she would leave all this behind at the end of the

week.

...

Nolan rubbed his eyes as the words on the screen blurred. Afternoon coffee would be in his future today; at least it was Wednesday—hump day—a perfect excuse for needing extra caffeine. He'd handled late nights and limited sleep a lot better when caring for a baby hadn't been part of the equation. His phone vibrated and he lunged for it, anything to help snap him awake.

Bodhi: *How are things with the kid and the baby momma? Haven't gotten an update.*

Because he had a whole new world of responsibilities.

Nolan: *Been busy. The kid doesn't sleep. And I don't have a cry alarm.*

Yet. He needed to check on the tracking information and find out if the item had even shipped.

Bodhi: *That's because you have a baby! But good, you aren't letting the hearing mom do all the work.*

Nolan: *Trying not to.*

Succeeding was a different story. He'd managed the night before and was falling asleep on the job.

Bodhi: *Details. You've got to be shitting your pants at caring for a kid.*

Nolan: *The only one shitting is Archie.*

And he almost gagged at the memory of the smell.

Bodhi: *Stop avoiding me and answer.*

Nolan glanced around his office, at the sparse personal artifacts. He hadn't managed to bring any of himself here, much like his apartment. The only life he had was Archie's dinosaur bag.

Nolan: *I don't know. You know my history and there's this helpless baby depending on me to do the right thing. And Izzy already working herself thin trying to do her best. Can I really help them? Or will I just mess things up further?*

Bodhi: *Everyone messes up, you know this.*

Nolan: *Not with my special skill.*

Not when his feelings for Izzy and Archie multiplied by the day.

Nolan: *We've got this happy family setup going right now, and fears aside, it's tempting.*

Bodhi: *Tempting, really? You're twenty-five. Yeah, the kid is your responsibility now. But is this really what you want?*

Yes. Or, he thought he did. But Bodhi continued typing, the thought bubble appearing, and Nolan waited him out.

Bodhi: *Regardless of dating as many people as possible, because that's never been your style, you'd be giving up spontaneous trips and going out to bars. How you going to play poker or video games and watch a kid? You can't go from single to family guy in a blink of an eye without some serious growing pains. And when have any of your plans ever worked out?*

Nolan: *Doesn't there come a time when I have to step up regardless of my past?*

Bodhi: *Yeah, and that's now. Just don't go off half-cocked. You're going to make mistakes. Ease into it. Or are you thinking with your dick after all? Is it the kid, or the woman?*

Nolan wanted to put his phone down and ignore his friend, but he knew this conversation would eat at him until he finished.

Nolan: *Both. They're a package deal and even if they weren't, I'd want them both.*

The truth of his words sidled through him. He wasn't settling for either one; both Izzy and Archie had become important to him.

Bodhi: *Slow the fuck down. When you race in without a safety net you send rockets through the gym. Think first. You're already this kid's father. Make sure he knows you when he's grown up.*

Nolan's thumbs twitched as though he held a controller, wanting to argue. But no one knew him better than Bo, except for perhaps his own mother. He'd always been a screw-up, and he always would be. Bo was right, one way or another he was going to mess things up.

Nolan shoved his phone to the edge of the desk. He couldn't focus on this shit now, he had work to do. The same job that didn't want him and Izzy dating. He didn't know the solution to the problem, not when the risks on either end compounded each other. The number of ways this could go wrong were astronomical, for his relationship with Izzy and Archie, for their jobs, all of it problematic. He'd have to think, have to figure out what he could do to fix it all. Later. He checked the social media accounts, answered a few questions, and worked at getting his head screwed on straight.

More notifications came in, and he realized Izzy was dishing out information contradicting what he'd just sent. What the... He started a retroaction message, then figured that would just increase the confusion; he needed to settle this behind the scenes. He switched over to grab the appropriate information, ready to show Izzy where she messed up, and stopped short.

She hadn't messed up. He had.

He blinked at the screen, rubbed his eyes, blinked again.

But nope, *he* had the information wrong. Him. And the assistant currently working with a kid corrected him.

Flashbacks to sharing an email that resulted in a board member resigning nearly blinded him. Not the same, not even close. But he'd made a mistake, and the last one held serious consequences.

He'd thought that maybe, just maybe, he was getting his life on track and leaving the screw-up behind. But if this was him—falling asleep and sending out incorrect information—after one night's missed sleep, then he couldn't survive. Apparently, his limit for being able to do things well was one. He could either be this somewhat family man, or he could be good at his job. And he couldn't help support Archie if he didn't keep this job.

Bodhi was right. He needed to back the hell off after this week. And even though the thought of Izzy and Archie leaving made his chest ache, he pushed it aside. If he didn't, he'd just end up losing them completely. Maybe in a few years he'd learn how to juggle more than one thing at a time.

...

Izzy finished feeding Archie, grateful that she had managed to multitask with her phone while doing so. Sure, it didn't send the best message to her kid as she typed away and he nursed, but work had to be done. Especially when Nolan was messing up.

"I think you wore him out," she whispered.

The nine-month-old had no response.

She held him and headed for Nolan's office. At the door she set Archie on the floor and flashed the light, alerting Nolan to their presence. Archie crawled over to the corner, where the bag with his belongings sat.

Dark circles hung under Nolan's eyes; he looked like he'd missed more than a single night's sleep. And while Izzy felt

bad, she'd missed so much she could sleep for a month and still not catch up.

"Thank you," he signed, movements small.

"You did the same for me."

He yawned and leaned back in his chair, stretching his shirt over his fit chest, and she couldn't help remembering how he looked without the shirt. The feel of his skin still lingered on her hands. *"True. I should get more coffee. How do you survive?"*

She shrugged. Because she had to. *"It's hard at the start. I once thought my pillow was the baby and it took me ten minutes to wake up enough and realize what was wrong."*

"I don't know how you do it."

She glanced over at their son, who had pulled a book from the bag and chomped on the soft edges. *"Love."* Then she made the mistake of turning back to Nolan and catching his eyes. An unnamed emotion swirled between them. Too premature for any declaration. She squared her shoulders, because regardless of what passed between them, he'd need real feelings to care for Archie the way the baby deserved.

Nolan shook his head, and the moment broke. *"We still need to prepare for the meeting tomorrow."*

Izzy nodded, but something had shifted. It felt as though Nolan closed himself off. She wasn't sure of the cause, and even though she wanted to poke and prod, she knew better. It probably had to do with where they were. Work. Not a place they could be an item. And she still didn't know what would happen if the truth of Archie's paternity came out. With those sobering thoughts she grabbed a notebook. Nolan went over the plan and what Izzy needed to do. They were nearly finished when something breezed by Izzy's back.

She stood up and glanced around, checking on Archie first, who sat a few feet away, and then behind her to where he'd thrown his book. *"You bored?"* she asked.

He clapped. Then again, he clapped for most things.

"He's got a good arm," Nolan signed. *"I'm thinking sports might be in his future."*

Izzy narrowed her eyes. He broke off the conversation earlier, and now he chatted as if he'd be around for the long haul. And her traitorous imagination conjured up the scene of Nolan standing on the sidelines, cheering Archie on in baseball, practicing at home or in a park. It all seemed so real and she couldn't trust it. After all, she once insisted unicorns were real, much to her older sister's endless frustration.

Not to her father's. He'd gone out and bought her a stuffed unicorn.

She refocused on her son, with the glint in his eyes that said, "I'll believe in unicorns, too."

"I'm more worried about what he'll break." She walked over and picked Archie up, then settled him on her hip. The smells of a filled diaper floated up to her. *"He needs a diaper change."*

Nolan's face scrunched up and he leaned away from them. *"He marked me the last time."*

Izzy's lips curved, she couldn't help it. *"Really?"*

Nolan nodded, a hint of fear in his eyes. *"Down my cheek and neck as I reached for a diaper. He was proud of himself, too."*

Izzy nodded, laughter bubbling up inside. *"He is proud. Welcome to the club. He's marked the entire family. Your turn, just keep him covered."* She held Archie out and Nolan took him.

"I still don't know what I'm doing."

Izzy grabbed her notepad. *"Same. I've got work to do."* Then she left him to handle the mess. The kid was his responsibility—time for him to accept it.

Chapter Sixteen

Nolan's second diaper change went far smoother than the first time; he needed to wash his hands only twice when finished. He picked Archie up and his head went straight for Nolan's shoulder, as he'd done before when tired. Nolan took a walk around the building, and when he returned, Archie's eyes were closed.

Huh. Maybe he had a better handle on this parenting thing than he'd thought.

He settled at his desk, but now had only one hand free to work. He needed to get that fabric wrap contortionist thingy from Izzy, but he'd already proven he couldn't get the thing to work on his own. Instead he scrolled through his work, typing up slow responses, feeling computer illiterate, pecking with one hand.

There were many things he failed at, but computers weren't one of them.

His light flashed, and he saw Deanna at his door. "*Careful, baby fever is contagious,*" she signed.

Deanna probably would have had a different reaction if she knew he was the father, a reaction that would result in him being let go, or Izzy, or both of them.

"*What's up?*"

Deanna's smile faded at his curt sign. "*I wanted to go over the meeting order for tomorrow. Seems you're trapped anyway, so good timing.*"

He forced a smile, trying to get back to the good vibe

Deanna usually projected.

"We'll start with a budget update, then shift into the programs and important issues. Since your presentation should bring fresh life to our social media presence, we want to wait for the end."

He swallowed. He preferred to get things over with whenever possible. Less time for things to fester and for him to worry about the inevitable fallout. But he was new here, his job new. Lowest person on the totem pole meant he had to go with the flow. Besides, pushing for earlier would just look bad. *"Works for me."*

"Good, not that you had much choice."

Deanna's face held only good humor, but Nolan wondered if he somehow had a camera in his mind that others watched without shame.

"You'll be in charge of getting your technology set up. The room is available an hour ahead of time, will that be enough?"

He could do it in five minutes, maybe ten if he got stuck with Archie. *"Plenty."*

"Good." Deanna glanced behind her, then stepped farther into the room, blocking any eavesdroppers. *"How are things going with Izzy?"*

Nolan's signing hand went to Archie's back. How the hell did he answer that? Not appropriate to share that she blew his mind with sex, or that having a permanent connection to her felt like a blessing and not a curse. *"Good?"* If his hand held any less confidence, his position would slip and he'd end up signing bad, and either way he looked at things, bad had nothing to do with Isabel Fineberg.

"I know you talked with me about helping out, but you seem to be watching the baby a lot. This isn't a problem?"

Nolan's throat felt like ten razors trailed down it. It made perfect sense for him to be watching Archie, to anyone who knew his relationship. And no one here did, or could. *"Not a problem. I offered to help because if I didn't, Izzy would*

need the week off and I needed her assistance." At least that much held truth.

Deanna nodded, as though he'd signed something more potent than he did. *"I received a complaint that the baby was being watched more by you than Izzy, and even though I hadn't seen proof of that and know other staff are pitching in as well, I needed to follow up. Glad it hasn't been an issue."*

"Complaint?"

"Yes. And then I find Archie here, with you."

Archie belonged here as much as he did with Izzy, but Nolan couldn't share that small detail. He really needed a warning label inked on his forehead: caution, may cause mistakes, including pregnancy, best to avoid.

"I'm just helping out as needed." He felt like absolute crap minimizing his importance in Archie's life. The whole conversation set off a fear deep in his gut, a fear that he'd have to keep up this disconnected act until one of them changed jobs. He didn't know Izzy's story, but he knew how few and far between his options were. Another reason he took that job in New York. Odds were he'd find something far enough away it wouldn't allow him to be present in Archie's life the way he wanted to.

"Helping and not taking over?"

Nolan shifted, careful not to wake the baby, feeling trapped in a room without air. Maybe he had taken over, but that had to do with his parentage and nothing related to work.

If he explained that, however, they could both be out of a job, no meeting going poorly to cause it. Deanna had her stern boss expression on, and Nolan's gut continued to sink.

"Not taking over. Doing what I can when Izzy needs it. Then she can help with the presentation. She's been a great support, and I couldn't have done it without her." His words felt cold and distant. Like the supervisor he was supposed to be and not a man who had a complex personal relationship

with the woman.

Deanna tapped the door twice. He tried to read her face, to see if he'd settled the concerns, but the poker face held only professionalism, not calming his fired-up nerves. *"Looking forward to seeing what you two have created."*

If she wanted to see what Izzy and he could create, all she had to do was look at Archie.

Archie. He glanced down at the baby. His responsibility, only he had to pretend it wasn't.

Life was a bitch.

...

Izzy felt only a smidge bad for leaving Nolan to handle the diaper change. She figured with one needed every three hours or so, times nine months, she could put Nolan on diaper duty until Archie turned one without batting an eyelash.

Lisa sauntered into the area, a smug smile on her face. Before Izzy could ask what happened, Lisa settled in at her computer, not offering any details. Izzy refocused on her work. Best not to get involved in workplace drama.

A few minutes later Nolan walked into the area, a sleeping Archie over his shoulder. Izzy checked her computer for a missed message or issue with the social media, but nothing obvious jumped out at her. Lisa glanced up, gave Nolan an overexaggerated wave, then went back to her work, though Izzy didn't miss her chair now swiveled enough in their direction that she'd be able to see them.

"Something wrong?" Izzy asked as Nolan got close, placing a hand on her son's back.

Nolan shook his head. *"Nothing's wrong."* Then he shifted, blocking Lisa from seeing him. *"I know it's not time to switch yet, but I think we need to."*

Izzy narrowed her eyes, trying to read Nolan's face and find the hidden meaning. He wasn't in view, but she still

was, so her options were limited. *"Of course."*

They transferred the sleeping baby, and Izzy breathed in his scent, using it to calm her rising worry that something was wrong here. Very wrong.

Lisa got up and left, and Nolan tracked her movement until they were alone, his thumbs twitching by his sides. *"Sorry about that. Someone complained to Deanna about the amount of time Archie's been with me."*

Izzy's jaw hinged open. *"What?"*

Nolan shrugged. *"I don't get it but figured we needed to be extra cautious."* His gaze lingered on Archie, an almost sad one that turned Izzy's worries into hope—hope for the future of Archie with Nolan.

"I think we have to."

"Are you O.K. taking him?"

Izzy nodded. *"We'll be fine. I'm used to this."*

"I know. You shouldn't have to be."

Izzy's insides melted at his words and how he'd stepped in for their son. Then her gaze settled on Lisa's empty desk and the animosity the woman had toward her. Izzy had a suspicion she knew exactly who had filed the complaint. She needed to be extra cautious. If Lisa discovered her real connection with Nolan, both past and present, their jobs would be done for.

Chapter Seventeen

Nolan sat on his couch, laptop balanced on his lap, making some tweaks to his presentation, determined to burn the midnight oil to get it perfect. No other option existed. If this wasn't perfect, he'd fail.

Izzy's phone vibrated on the coffee table, and the screen lit up. He paid no attention to the notification and instead focused on the background. A younger picture of Archie. Thinner cheeks, sleeping, wrapped in fabric. He knew it to be the same baby but it also felt different. The kid wasn't even a year old, how could he have been different only a few months ago?

The screen darkened and went black before he could finish chronicling all the changes. He wanted to get the image back up, but he had no reason to pick up Izzy's phone. And yet he couldn't bring his attention back to work, the fading memory of the image playing in his mind.

Izzy appeared in his peripheral and he forced his gaze away from the phone. *"You got a message."*

"Oh, thanks," Izzy said and grabbed her phone. She scrolled immediately past the home screen image that Nolan wanted to see, read the text, and then typed a response, before her eyes met his again. *"What's wrong?"* she signed.

"Nothing." He turned back to his work but couldn't even formulate a word. The image stuck in his mind like an in-game object he had to find before being able to progress further. He faced Izzy. *"You have a picture of Archie on*

there."

Izzy grinned. *"I have his whole life on here."*

Fascinating. *"I mean the screen saver. Archie looks different."*

Izzy smiled and loaded the image before handing him the phone. *"That was his first night home. I was clueless. My mom helped me wrap him."*

Nolan looked at the newborn face, cataloguing similarities and differences, itching to draw it. He thought of what Izzy had signed, realizing how much he missed out on, a bunch of little and big moments they'd had without him. It pained him, but life had unfolded that way, for better or worse.

He handed the phone to Izzy and tried once again to focus on work, but he couldn't. Izzy moved around in his kitchen, cleaning and prepping Archie's things for the next day. And each time she shifted, he followed her movements, liking her being in his space far too much. It didn't make sense. Surely after spending most of the day every day for four days together they'd be wearing on each other's nerves, but he found he wanted more of her, and he wanted to know her better.

His work wasn't getting done, not tonight. Not with the week nearly over. Who cared it was only Wednesday? Tomorrow they'd be busy with the board meeting. Then Friday would plow into their lives, and Izzy and Archie would leave.

That thought caused his chest to physically ache, but it had to be done. They didn't live with him, and his and Izzy's jobs were on the line. He'd work with Izzy to figure something out for Archie's care, but the policy meant their brief rekindling needed to stay just that, brief.

Izzy caught him studying her facial expressions as she worked, and now her dark eyes held his and he had trouble remembering what he'd just been thinking about.

Nolan closed his laptop and made his way into the kitchen, a heat-seeking missile with only Izzy as the target. She

stopped what she was doing, and he hadn't a clue what that was. She could have had a knife in her hand, or a banana, and his reaction would have been the same. He kept moving until their toes touched and he leaned down to press his lips against hers.

She kissed him back, wrapping her arms around him, and every damn worry in his head fled. He swept his tongue into her mouth, tangling with her taste and texture. All the reasons why he shouldn't be kissing her sailed out the window.

He was already hard and throbbing at the barest touch of her lips. He gripped her sides, attempting to hang on to a sliver of control, being mindful of her physical concerns. But she rubbed against him, more of an impatient squirm, and his control wanted to snap. He held on tighter, knowing that with their history, she was the one person with whom he needed to retain control.

Izzy's nails scraped down his back, and he damn near lost it. He collected her hands and pulled back, noting she breathed just as fast as he did, though she wore a sly smile. *"What do you want?"*

She rubbed against him again, clueless to the ledge he wobbled on. *"You."*

That one sign did something funny to him. He wasn't used to being wanted. Wasn't used to someone knowing some of his faults and still wanting more. He wasn't used to any of this. *"Tell me what you need. I'll give it to you."*

She took his hand and backed out of the kitchen, down the hall, eyes hot on him the entire time. He stumbled after her. She could have walked right into a fire pit and he'd have followed.

In his room, she pointed to the bed and he lay down, heart hammering, body pulsing, in this woman's complete control. She rubbed her chin, face scrunched in concentration, then signed, *"Clothes off,"* with such precision he forgot her newbie ASL status. He yanked off his shirt, shoved down his

pants, until he lay there in his socks and boxer briefs, dick trying in vain to get through the flap of fabric.

Izzy pointed to his feet. "*Socks.*"

Right. He crossed one leg, then the other, removing the offending items.

Her eyes raked him up and down, as though she liked what she saw, and anticipation threatened to steal his sanity. Then she gathered the hem of her silky green top and pulled it over her head.

He forgot how to breathe. Her full breasts struggled in the white nursing bra she wore, the clasps on the sides he'd learned were convenient but not for him. Then she undid the buckle on her beige pants and shimmied them down her long legs, and Nolan was pretty sure his heart stopped beating as well. She was gorgeous, all of her.

Izzy took a step toward the bed, then stopped and reached behind her. The next thing he knew her bra was on the floor, those full breasts and tight nipples bared to his view, and now his mouth went dry. She was killing him with her beauty, no other way around it.

But when she climbed onto the bed and straddled him, all his vital functions sprang back to life. He ran his hands up her legs to her waist, an aching need to touch those breasts. Slow and steady. He didn't know everything about her body or what she wanted and needed, not yet, but he knew to be careful and ensure her pleasure.

She kissed him and his hands moved to her back, holding her close, the tips of her breasts somehow cool against his overheated skin. She shifted the center of her against his erection, and he considered doing math equations to keep from finishing too soon. Then she deepened the kiss, and he lost himself in the wonder of her.

His hands worked to her sides, caressing skin as he inched to her breasts. A rumble of a moan vibrated through her and she lifted an inch, giving him access to her nipples. He took it. Gentle swipes against her peaks, as she rested against his

shoulders, eyes shut in pleasure. His dick demanded to be freed and plow into her, but he kept at his pace, even as his entire body yearned for more.

She held her weight with one hand, the other trailing down his body, making lazy circles on his skin, before she shifted and those same lazy circles began over his dick. He throbbed, painfully hard. She freed him and he sucked in a breath as she wrapped her fingers around him and pumped.

He closed his eyes, and her body moved. Before he could open them, her lips were around his dick, and he forced his hips not to lurch forward. She swallowed him farther and he opened his eyes, needing to see her long hair swept behind her as she sucked him. His dick kicked and Izzy grinned. His heart damn near rolled over and waved a white flag with Izzy's face imprinted on it.

She sucked harder. His balls tingled, and he knew he had to make some move or she wouldn't get her fill. "*Stop.*" He prepared to explain, but the sly grin on her face told him she knew exactly what she did to him.

No more Mr. Nice Guy.

He slipped out of his boxers, reached for a condom, and rolled it on. "*How do you want it?*"

Izzy bit her lip. Then a twinkle damn near glistened in her eyes. She stepped out of her panties and he traced her skin, waiting for her. She climbed onto the bed, ass high in the air, eyebrows raised, and he nearly lost his battle right then and there.

He kissed her fast and hard before moving around behind her. She glistened between her legs, and he swiped a finger against her folds, finding her wet and warm and everything he wanted. Then he pushed in slowly before checking on her.

"*More.*"

For someone who'd been worried about sex after having a kid, she had an appetite for more than a light fuck. He pulled back before pushing in, her body lurching at the

action. And then he forced himself to stop, checking on her.

She glared at him. "*More.*"

"*You sure?*"

"*Yes!*"

He gave her what she asked for, hard thrusts from behind, filling her with him. The caveman inside wanted to rip off the condom and take her flesh to flesh. But he knew the risks in that act.

Those thoughts didn't dampen his drive. He bent around her, reaching forward, rubbing her nipple. She shook under him, her body tightening against him, and he increased his pace, mindful of only their mutual needs, of fueling her as much as he could.

The tingling started again and he increased his pressure, holding back until her quakes slowed, until her breathing regulated; then, and only then, did he let himself go.

He pulled out, even though he wanted to stay in her warmth. She collapsed to a sitting position, and he took her face in his hands and kissed her. Soft, sweet, nothing like the sex they just had.

When he pulled back, her cheeks were flushed.

There'd never been anyone like Izzy. And he had a sneaking suspicion there never would be.

Chapter Eighteen

Archie's cries yanked Izzy out of a happy dream filled with entire nights to enjoy Nolan's body and uninterrupted sleep. She took a moment to wake, as she'd fallen asleep in Nolan's arms, the same arms still surrounding her. His warm chest her pillow, his steady breaths proof that he didn't hear a thing. At least not the piercing cries of their son.

Izzy pushed herself up and slipped out of the bed, wondering if they could start some sort of alternating schedule, even for the few days they had left together. She'd take an hour of uninterrupted sleep any time of day when offered.

Once dressed she headed to the spare room, where Archie stood with his hands on the side of the crib, his face wet with tears. She picked him up and he quieted down, head pushing in to her shoulder. She bounced him. "Teeth again, kiddo?" She reached into the crib and pulled out the pacifier. Archie accepted it willingly. "Guess you really don't need nighttime nursing anymore." She changed his diaper and tried to settle him back into his crib, hoping to go back to sleep herself. Archie immediately stood and started whimpering. So out into the living room they both went.

She picked up her phone, the lock screen reminding her of Nolan's earlier reaction to three-day-old Archie. "I think we need to gather up your pictures for your father."

Archie clapped, like he did for everything. Izzy picked up her computer, going through the photos with Archie on her

lap. They started with her growing belly, then the hospital, then the days and weeks until now. So many pictures and Archie wasn't even a year old yet.

She moved most of them into a slideshow. Archie fell asleep on her lap as she worked, losing interest in his own pictures. She tried not to wonder how things might have been different if she'd been able to find Nolan back then, but the images came too easily to mind. He'd stepped up when she needed him, when they needed him, and she had no doubt he would have done the same earlier if he could have.

Ultrasounds, childbirth classes, labor, he would have been there. Her mind conjured up a visual of Nolan holding a newborn Archie, swaddled for the first time, smile on his face, pride in his eyes. She tried to shake those thoughts free, but the image lingered, a truth in the meaning refusing to diminish.

Those thoughts still swirled after she put Archie into his crib and climbed back into bed with Nolan. She cuddled into his backside, spooning him, and he snuggled back into her. If it wasn't for Archie they might have had a date, perhaps two, easing into things. But having a baby together changed everything. Izzy didn't want to hope, didn't want to dream, but the future formed in her mind as she wrapped her arms around a man she suspected she was falling for.

Sleep wouldn't come, not with the feel of his naked chest beneath her hands, and the gentle rise and fall of his body. She trailed her fingers over his lean muscles, up and down ridges, unaware how low she'd gotten until her fingers nestled into a patch of coarse hair, and Nolan's breathing no longer came in gentle puffs.

He rolled over before her fingers could dip any lower. She followed his outline as he sat up, unable to see any distinction until he flipped on the light. They both blinked to adjust to the brightness. *"What's wrong? Archie crying?"*

Huh. Maybe she could have woken him after all. *"Already*

taken care of. He's asleep."

Nolan nodded and ran a hand through his hair. The bedhead look, coupled with bare chest and sheets pooled in his lap, made her lick her lips.

"So what's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." She fumbled with her words, unsure how to describe that she woke him by enjoying his body, when she realized his eyes weren't on hers, but on her lips.

She licked them again. Nolan grumbled and leaned forward, fitting his mouth to hers. They fell backward in the bed, lips locked, and Izzy's traitorous heart nearly jumped ship. Her wanderlust soul found its home and wanted to make one final leap and then follow this man wherever he went, with their little family.

His hands slid under her shirt, up to her breasts, easily slipping inside the loose nursing bra. Izzy arched into him, slightly worried about spillage, since she'd been used to nighttime nursing, but unable to care with him plucking her nipples and setting off a rocket of need straight down to her core.

She ran her hands down his torso, getting a thrill out of him being naked while she wore clothes. Her fingers found him hard, and she held that smooth warmth in her palm, stroking as their lips remained locked and his hands continued their magic on her chest. The need between them tinged with desperation, but also the growing awareness and care.

Heart overboard and drowning.

Izzy let herself go, let herself revel in the moment, in the closeness and the passion. Nolan's hand trailed down her body and into her pants. She spread her legs, tiny waves setting off the moment he pushed a single finger into her needy core.

Had she really been worried about her body post-baby? Because he made her forget any and all concerns, made her only feel. If this was sex after having a kid, she should have

been doing this a lot earlier.

With him.

He added a second finger and she halted in her pumping, holding him tight, as a wave rocked through her. She forced her eyes open, finding him watching her, so much heat in his gaze her clothes should have evaporated. A big word that started with L and came before “you” threatened to fall from her lips or her hands, and in an effort to keep quiet she grasped the bottom of her top and pulled it off.

His eyes heated further and she squirmed into his hand, setting off another wave, needing his cock inside her now.

When she regained movement, she shifted until his fingers slid out, whimpering at the loss. “*Condom,*” her shaking hands signed, and he rummaged around in the bedside table, giving her a world-class view of his ass, and she wanted to crawl over and nibble him. Instead she removed the rest of her clothes.

Nolan turned back to her, condom already on, looking like the best damn ice cream one could ever have. Or cake. Or drink. Or man. She shifted onto her back, inviting him into her body.

“*You’re beautiful,*” he signed as he crawled over to her and positioned himself above her entrance. “*So damn beautiful.*” And then he pushed in and fireworks went off like the Fourth of July on steroids.

She moved with him, her entire body sensitized and tuned in to his every touch and shift. Until coldness hit her chest. She glanced down and, yup, she had leaked.

Mood killer, postpartum style.

Nolan paused, but his face showed no disgust. “*You O.K.?*”

“*I’m leaking.*”

He glanced down and the heat in his eyes didn’t diminish. “*Can I lick?*” His hands moved in a sensual motion, as though outlining her breast, and she nearly felt his touch.

She shuddered. And even though his smile showed he felt it, he waited for her nod, before bending, blond hair falling

over his forehead as he lapped up the trail down her breast, tingles exploding around his touch. Her body quaked.

"I see why Archie likes it." Then he licked up her second breast and she nearly came from that alone. He gave her a satisfied grin, welcoming all the changes to her body as though they were the best new technology. She didn't understand how it was possible, but Nolan found her more attractive as a mother. She started to wonder if it was a MILF thing, when he gave her one big thrust, and all thoughts scattered from her mind. She fell into the rhythm, the fast pace, as everything climbed until she didn't care if she leaked, only that this moment continued.

She clutched his shoulders, his back, his ass, meeting his thrusts, loving every second they shared together. Until she burst, one final orgasm, satisfying every nerve she had and some she hadn't known about.

Nolan's head rested in the crook of her neck, and she realized they either came together, or damn near close. He held himself above her, breathing heavily, and she brushed his hair off his forehead.

Her heart screamed at her, confession after confession, and she swallowed them all down. Too soon, too raw, too much at stake. Then he pressed his lips against hers, soft and sweet, as though answering her emotional upheaval.

Maybe, just maybe, they were on the same page. And maybe one day her fantasy would come true. For now she held him close, a few more moments to lay in this bliss.

...

Nolan stifled a yawn the next morning as he waited in line at a coffee shop close to his apartment. And yet this tired felt happy, a willing sacrifice for having two of the most important people to him in his life, at least for a few more days. The coffee aroma surrounded him, and a few feet away, Izzy sat at a table, with Archie kicking in his stroller.

Two tired parents called for breakfast out and they were far enough away from work that no one should catch them.

He liked this, being out with Izzy and Archie, doing something for them by taking care of their order, even if it benefited only Izzy. It killed him a bit to realize this couldn't continue, not with their jobs. He hadn't a clue how they could continue without it becoming a problem for one, or both, of them. Maybe after adequate coffee and a thorough reading of the human resources packet he thought had migrated to the bottom of his desk drawer, he'd figure something out.

The line inched forward, and he glanced back at Archie, who flailed his hands and feet, looking right at Nolan with his drooling smile. Nolan looked forward, then swung his head back around to Archie, who clapped and laughed. Since Izzy was checking something on her phone, Nolan continued the peek-a-boo game, until he misjudged the moving line and rammed into the person in front of him.

He held his hands up, inching backward, signing "*sorry*" while mouthing the word. The woman around forty or fifty with overly processed blonde hair did not look amused. He'd explain more about the kid, but as soon as he grabbed his phone to type his apology the woman turned back around, ending his chance to communicate.

That cut into some of his happy, tired state. He kept his phone out, since he'd moved closer to the front than he thought. When his turn arrived he handed over his phone, with his order and Izzy's typed up. The cashier's mouth moved and Nolan couldn't figure out what he was saying. He pointed to his ear and shook his head. The guy nodded and rang up the order, reminding Nolan why he liked this place; for whatever reason they discriminated less than other places did.

When their order was ready he brought it over to the table, Archie clapping as he sat down. "*Does he ever not clap?*" he asked.

Izzy took a sip of her caramel latte. *"Sometimes. I find the clapping cute."*

He did, too.

"You ready for the big meeting?"

His hand wobbled as he unwrapped his breakfast sandwich and he wanted to kick himself. It was a meeting, nothing to be nervous or overdramatic about. But so much rested on this one meeting. He had to prove himself, needed to know his ideas were good and valid and that he could be a positive addition to the agency. And yeah, he knew more than half of his worries stemmed from his childhood and the New York fiasco, and that he amped up the pressure with no outside help needed. He wanted this win.

Izzy waved. *"You O.K.? I lost you there."*

He took a bite of his egg and cheese sandwich. *"I'm fine."* It would have worked if his signs hadn't turned jerky, knocking into his large iced coffee. It wobbled and he tried to grab it, somehow managing to knock it again.

Right into his lap.

Nolan stood up, the liquid dripping down his pants and onto the floor. He thanked his luck he went with iced and not hot as the cold drink chilled his skin. Izzy jumped up, handing over napkins as Archie clapped.

"I suspect you are a little bit nervous?"

Nolan dabbed at his pants, but nothing short of an industrial-sized dryer would work at this point. *"Maybe."*

Izzy pushed her lips together, but he caught the laughter in her eyes. An employee showed up with more napkins, as though the tiny scraps would take care of the large iced coffee he currently wore as pants, and began mopping up the spill.

Izzy still held in her laughter.

"It's O.K., laugh."

She shook her head. *"No, it's not funny."*

He glanced down at his light beige pants and the large darker beige from his drink. He looked like he was Archie

without a diaper. *"It's a little funny."*

Her shoulders shook, and she covered her mouth.

He removed her fingers, finding her lips curved. *"It's O.K. "* After all, he was used to doing something like this; it surprised him he hadn't done it before around her. Though the failed condom certainly had been a big one. And yet, her laughter coaxed his out, and he had to smile even though his legs were wet and cold.

"No, it's not O.K., but seeing your smile is." Then, even though Archie sat there watching them, she lifted onto her toes and kissed him on the lips, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

They cleaned up the trash and one of the employees brought over a new drink for Nolan. He thanked them the best he could, because this day now needed even more caffeine than before. He took a sip, but the cold beverage just reminded him of his cold thighs. Nolan knew these pants would not work for an important presentation. *"I'm going home to get changed. Bonus, we won't arrive at work at the same time."*

Izzy nodded. *"Good idea, but eat first or take it with you."*

He settled down to eat a slightly soggy meal while uncomfortable, but at least he had Izzy and Archie with him. With any luck, this would be the biggest misadventure of the day, saving him from any calamities with the board meeting.

Chapter Nineteen

Izzy worked at typing up a report for Deanna, while keeping an eye on Archie playing at her feet. Multitasking was a seriously underrated skill, and from now on she'd be putting that front and center on her résumés—multitasking genius.

Movement at the area entrance caught her attention, and she knew it to be Nolan before she even looked up. She always managed to sense him, as though their connection ran deeper than the kid they shared. She soaked him in, enjoying the view, especially as he'd popped open the top two buttons on his green shirt, showing off his neck. Then his disheveled hair came into focus, and the worry creases around his eyes. The closer they got to the meeting, the more frazzled he appeared, the spilled coffee this morning the tip of the iceberg, she feared. She knew the meeting was important to him, but each nervous twitch of his jaw reminded her she hadn't realized how much until now.

He stopped by her desk, fingers tapping the surface three times before signing. *"Can I bother you?"*

She bit her cheek, because she really liked being bothered by him, in many different ways. Perhaps he needed a little relaxation, and she knew a few things that caused him to lose control. But not the place or the time, and not at work with Archie at her feet. She kept her cool and signed, *"What's up?"*

"Can you check the sound on the video again? I know most of the board is Deaf, but for those who do have

hearing I want to make sure the full effect is felt."

She smiled. She'd already listened to it a dozen times, getting the sound to line up just right, but the slight shake to his hands was not typical of Nolan. *"Sure. But..."* She pointed down, and he came around her desk to where Archie played. The minute Nolan came into view, Archie looked up, clapped as though his father appearing was a magic act, and began crawling over.

Apparently Izzy wasn't the only one getting attached.

"Hard to listen and watch him," she signed. *"I'll have to wait until he naps."*

"No. I need your help. If anyone has a problem with it they can talk to me and not Deanna." Nolan scooped up the baby. Then he turned and walked away, tossing Archie into the air, his peals of laughter echoing around the corner.

Izzy sat for a moment, watching even though they were out of sight. The interaction played on a loop in her head. A simple, domestic moment. After less than a week, Nolan didn't even flinch. He was hands-on and involved with his son's life, even if work didn't want him to be.

Izzy sent up a silent prayer that it would continue and they would find some way around the office protocols. For Archie's sake. And hers, but Archie came first.

"That is the cutest thing. He's really taken to your baby," Lisa said.

Izzy smiled and nodded, afraid to speak. She'd nearly forgotten about Lisa's presence and feared too much showed in her interactions with Nolan.

"I love how you've taught Archie ASL. Was it just baby sign stuff?"

Izzy's smile faltered. Why would she teach baby sign when she could give her child two full languages? "Actually Archie's father is Deaf, so it made perfect sense."

Izzy clamped her mouth shut. Shit. Why had she said that? Why hadn't she mentioned her Deaf brother-in-law, which was reason enough, beyond the benefits of dual languages?

Lisa leaned forward. "Really? He's Deaf? Do I know him?" Her lips curved, more sly than friendly, as though a warning simmered below the surface.

Izzy lowered her eyebrows, no longer able to keep her cool. Lisa had probably met a dozen Deaf adults and suddenly thought she knew everyone? "I really need to get back to work. Excuse me." Izzy stood and made a beeline for the front desk, eager to get away from talkative Lisa.

At the front desk Shanice clicked on the computer, not on a call. Izzy tapped the desk and proceeded to speak in both languages. "Odd question, but do we have any headphones here? I need to listen to the video again and don't want to bother the other interns." Or be bothered by them.

Shanice nodded. "Yup. Hang on, I'll go grab 'em." She disappeared below her desk, rummaging around in drawers, before reemerging with a thick older model headset. "This is what we've got."

Izzy accepted it. "Thanks, I'll make it work."

Shanice looked around Izzy. "Where's that adorable little boy?"

"With his—" Izzy stopped herself short before she continued. What was with her today? "With Nolan. Just so I can check the sound." Crap, who had been the one complaining? Izzy hated to think it had been Shanice, but she had to be more careful.

"He's really a sweet guy."

Yeah, he was sweet. And sexy and stepping up even though he could have brushed Izzy and Archie off.

Shanice leaned forward. "What was that?" Her voice dropped low. "It really is a shame about the no-dating policy; you two would be cute together."

Danger. Danger. Abort mission! Izzy's cheeks warmed and she prayed the warmth didn't translate to a pink tinge. "I'm just grateful he's allowed me to work while my usual childcare was away."

Shanice laughed. "No, that's not it at all. But there's

nothing wrong with a harmless crush. I would totally crush on someone who liked my kid the way he likes yours, even if it was just a fun fantasy.”

Shanice had hit a little too close to reality. Yes, she did have a crush on Nolan, more than a crush, if she were honest. She took the interaction as a warning to do better about her self-control; no one could know the truth.

“Is there a reason for the policy? I expect that from bigger agencies than this.” She might be revealing too much of her stack of cards, but curiosity got the better of her and she had to know.

Shanice glanced around and continued speaking in a hushed voice, no signs. “I heard that ten years ago, before my time, there were two staff members who started dating. They had a nasty breakup and proceeded to sabotage each other’s jobs, which directly affected our services and negatively impacted several clients. Both were fired and the board added the no-dating policy to ensure they never had a similar issue again.”

Izzy felt the blood drain from her face but forced the smile to stay as she made her way back to her desk. A shiver ran down her spine; with that kind of rationale for creating the policy, she couldn’t think of a single scenario that would be okay with Nolan and her seeing each other, never mind having a kid together.

Through the worries, the initial words settled in, about how Nolan had taken to Archie. She was glad, oh so glad, that he had. But he had reasons to. And now everyone thought extra of him because he simply did what he should as Archie’s father.

A sad reality of life as a parent. Even with all the forward steps to gender equality and dual parenting many still assumed a woman would take care of the kids. So Archie would always be her job, but wasn’t it nice when a father babysat.

Izzy hadn’t grown up that way. Her father was hands-on as

much as her mother was. If she had a say, she'd choose the same dynamic for her children. But society still viewed things askew, making her question if the same sentiments would be shared if the truth of Archie's paternity were known.

She also wondered if her feelings for Nolan would have been as easily pegged without the permanent connection between them.

She could discuss it with Gaby later, all the ins and outs of motherhood versus fatherhood and the layers in between. For now, she had to focus on her job, which included keeping her distance from Nolan.

The office area was empty, Lisa nowhere to be found. Izzy headed straight for her desk, plugging in the headphones before sitting down, to ensure a certain nosy intern wouldn't bother her when she returned. She accessed the video and double-clicked on the icon. The program opened, but the image remained frozen. She clicked play several times, and nothing changed.

Ugh, old temperamental computers of the nonprofit life.

She closed the program down and tried again, Nolan's image still frozen onscreen. She'd played this on her computer before, so she knew it had worked. What could have changed in a day? And to make things worse, she'd be in charge of setting the visuals for the meeting, so she needed to be sure it worked on her computer.

Izzy closed it down again, needing to test out a different video. But she had none on her computer. She tapped the keyboard as she remembered the video she had made the night before—and stored on her cloud. She quickly downloaded it to her work computer and accessed the file. No audio, since Nolan didn't need it, and Izzy wasn't a huge fan of pairing images to music. The stress of finding the right sounds to capture the mood was too much for her slap-it-together-and-call-it-done style.

The images began, but she had them in order and really

didn't need to see her pregnant self on screen. She switched to shuffle, and after two images of Archie scrolled across, she knew this video worked. She minimized that and opened Nolan's presentation video again, relieved to find it working.

The headphones did the trick and she watched it twice, checking for sound and any other glitches they might have missed. And, perhaps, to steal the moment to observe Nolan without him present.

...

Nolan sat at his desk, Archie on his lap, blank document open as Archie penned his life memoir, which mostly consisted of the letter G. Nolan had closed down all his important programs and scrolled through his presentation on his phone. He had the video completed and polished and checked by Izzy, organized listings on his future ideas, and stats on the social media accounts.

All in all, he felt confident, even if he couldn't review as he preferred.

Archie continued banging, and every few pages Nolan caught an actual unintended word. Then the typing stopped and Archie faced the door just as Nolan caught a hand flick the lights.

Archie clapped.

Deanna entered, face softening at the sight of the baby. *"Oh look at you, so happy!"* She faced Nolan. *"I've been telling my partner how even with two kids this little one is giving me baby fever."*

Nolan bounced Archie on his knee, unsure how to respond. After the complaint, the timing couldn't be worse for her to be here when he had Archie.

"You ready for the presentation tonight?"

Throwing up sounded like a good idea, but he smiled instead and held a thumbs-up. *"We should be good to go."*

"Wonderful, we're all excited to see your new ideas." Her

eyes drifted to Archie, who had resumed his typing, then checked the door. *"Have you heard anything about his father?"*

Nolan stopped bouncing, his hand tightening around Archie's waist. *"What?"*

"Izzy's life is her business, and I will always support a single mother, but I heard a rumor that the father is Deaf."

Nolan swallowed the lump in his throat and forced himself not to grip the baby any tighter. *"Ohh?"* he asked, at a complete loss because anything he signed would be lying.

Deanna lifted a shoulder. *"The gossip came from the interns. Figured if anyone knew if they were just up to trouble it might be you. You and Izzy are getting close."*

Had Izzy said something? How would anyone guess that Archie's father was Deaf? Nolan glanced at the kid, who turned to him, wide smile, drool sliding down his cheek. Nolan wiped it away.

When he glanced up Deanna was watching him carefully. He signed, *"He's a good kid."*

"Baby fever is contagious, be careful. Are you sure you know nothing?"

No, he wasn't. Because not only did he know the truth, he was the truth. *"According to Izzy, all the appropriate people are involved in Archie's life."* Maybe that line would have worked if Archie hadn't grabbed onto Nolan's hand upon seeing his sign name, all but claiming they belonged together.

A fact, the glimmer in Deanna's eyes claimed, she caught. *"I see you've made an impression on him as well. Let me know if you need any help for tonight."* Then she left, closing the door behind her.

Nolan leaned back, hands in his hair. Archie crawled up his chest, tiny hands on Nolan's chin. The baby face in front him was all smiles, happy as could be. *"I need to claim you as my own, and stop all this nonsense and nosy business into your mother's life."* Archie bounced on his feet as if in

agreement. *"Soon."* And then, because he felt it, because his kid was right there, on his chest, happy to see him... *"I-love-you."*

Archie grasped onto his hand and chomped down on his pointer finger. Hard. Nolan jerked his hand back, shaking out the sting. *"I guess you don't feel the same."*

Archie shoved a hand in his mouth and Nolan figured he could blame this on the kid's teeth coming in, and got up in search of a pacifier or teething toy. He'd deal with his paternity another day and find some way to do right by both Archie and Izzy.

Chapter Twenty

Izzy's heavy chest told her it was time for Archie's nursing before the actual time came into question. She shifted a bicep against the side of her breast, trying to discreetly dull the aching. No such luck. Therefore, she finished the copies for the family program, dropped them off at Melissa's office, and made her way to Nolan's.

She didn't knock, hadn't even thought about it before opening the door and melting at the view before her: Archie on Nolan's lap, sending her a big grin and reaching for her. It occurred to Izzy she probably should have knocked, but sharing a kid, and a bed, with Nolan made it seem like a silly step. Still, she scolded herself. Regardless of Archie being there, she needed to stay professional—or spend another six months trying to find a job.

Nolan glanced up from his phone, eyes hazy with distraction and mouth set. Izzy scanned Archie, but he seemed fine. She crossed the room to them and picked up the baby. *"What's wrong?"* she signed, even as Archie squirmed and signed, *"Milk."*

Nolan scooted forward and started clicking, programs closing down as he did so. *"Nothing, just delayed because of him."*

Izzy stiffened, shifting Archie closer. *"Excuse me?"* she signed with as much attitude as possible with a nine-month-old grasping at her breast.

Nolan rubbed a hand down his face. *"Sorry. Didn't mean*

that. This meeting is important and I have to get it right."

Izzy kicked the door closed and moved to Nolan's guest chair, settling Archie to nursing. *"Yes, the meeting is important. But you've worked hard, you're prepared."*

Nolan ran his hands through his hair, tousling those blond locks. *"No matter how hard I work, I still mess things up."*

Worry lines settled over his face, and Izzy connected the dots with his other comments about messing up. Her heart went out to him. *"Maybe you overprepare?"*

He shook his head. *"The last time was at my job in New York. I came back late from lunch to a social media shitstorm. The guy who had my job before me claimed he lost his job due to racism. My boss had stepped in, arguing publicly rather than moving things to a private space, proving the claim. I tried to clean it up, smooth things over, but by that point it was too far gone."*

Izzy's heart ached at the visible pain on Nolan's face. *"That wasn't your fault."*

He shrugged. *"Perhaps, but if I hadn't been late I could have done my job and prevented it."*

"Maybe you need to trust me when I say you've got this." Sure, she had to fingerspell the last part, but some of the worry faded from his face.

"I do trust you." He faced his computer again. *"It's me I don't trust."*

Izzy stomped, vibrating the floor until he looked over; unfortunately Archie stopped nursing, looking up at her as well. She set him back on her nipple. *"Stop that. You think I'd leave my son with anyone?"*

"I'm his father."

"I don't care. I wouldn't leave him with you if I thought you'd hurt him, or let him get hurt."

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or that I've fooled you."

Izzy's gut churned slightly at Nolan's deadpan delivery.

"Wait until the meeting, then you'll see. They always see."

She wished Archie was done nursing so she could get up and leave. *"I'm a single mother who had an unplanned pregnancy. I haven't let that define me, and you can move on from a situation you didn't cause."*

His face turned grim. *"Don't you see? That unplanned pregnancy is my karma, not yours. Of course you can recover. For me? It's another nail in the coffin."*

She ground her teeth. How could he not see all his potential? Everything he'd done for the social media of the agency in the few weeks he'd been there. Everything he'd done for her in the short time they'd been in each other's lives again. *"You don't see yourself. There's nothing I can say until you do. Maybe after the meeting you'll see what we see."*

Then, because she couldn't sit there and let him put himself down any longer, she forced Archie to stop and covered up, then headed to her pumping room. She didn't mind nursing wherever, but right now she needed a few minutes to gather herself without an audience.

...

Nolan stared at the door after Izzy and Archie left, hands clenching and releasing. Didn't she realize he was just warning her, as he should have done from the start? She didn't understand the stakes—his fault for not explaining properly. But if he had, she might not have been in his bed, or even let him see his son.

He swallowed. He didn't want that world. He didn't want the kid to grow up without him; he didn't want to not know his son.

He pushed his chair back, the presentation and his preparation notes forgotten. Maybe he could make things right instead of making things wrong for a change. If so, he needed to start with his family.

Nolan left his computer and headed into the assistant

area, only to find Izzy's desk empty. Lisa waved overenthusiastically and he quickly responded and turned, before he got stuck in rudimentary ASL 101 with her, again. The last time she'd signed *whore* instead of *hot* and he nearly choked trying to swallow his laugh.

The room Izzy used to pump was closed, and Nolan rapped his knuckles on the door. Then repeated the action harder. When that still didn't get a response, he pulled out his phone.

Nolan: *I'm sorry, may I come in?*

He waited, hoping she had her phone with her and wasn't wondering which idiot knocked and did nothing, when it should have been easy to figure out he was that idiot. Then his phone vibrated and he quickly woke it.

Izzy: *Yes.*

Nolan opened the door and slipped inside. Izzy sat in a chair, Archie still nursing, two sets of wide eyes following him as he squeezed into the limited space around the chair in the small room. *"I'd crawl and beg your forgiveness, but I don't think I'd fit."*

Archie continued nursing, but a light humor danced in Izzy's eyes. *"No, I don't think you would."*

He glanced at his feet, feeling the weight of the stares from two of the most important people in his life. They'd let him in, believed in him. And if he wanted a chance at being worthy, he had to get it himself. *"I'm sorry. I'm used to important things going wrong, and I'm nervous."*

Izzy smiled. *"I'm used to changing direction, following any little interest, bouncing from thing to thing. I don't have that option anymore, and I don't have any complaints. That's my choice. You have the same choice."* She glanced at their son. *"You don't have to stick to my decisions, but you do need to decide what you want out of life and take it."*

You, I want you. The emotion rammed into his gut, the

words forming but unable to be released. Because he needed this meeting to prove things. Perhaps only to himself, but he needed that first. *"Thank you for your choice."*

She brushed a finger against Archie's cheek. *"You don't have to thank me. Loving him is thanks enough."* Her brown eyes locked with his, a challenge present. One he didn't know if he had what it took to meet.

Presentation first. One step at a time, that's all he could do.

Izzy shifted Archie up and handed him to Nolan. He accepted the baby as she fixed her top. He bounced Archie a few times before remembering the reflux issue and managed to turn the baby just in time for him to spit up on the rug.

Nolan scrunched his nose; that would smell. Izzy sighed and pulled out a rag from her pocket, wiping Archie's mouth and then the mess. Nolan wanted to point out his luck, but he wasn't sure if missing his shirt before a big meeting was a plus, or if hitting the rug defeated the shirt. Add in the fact he already spilled coffee on himself, and the shirt would have rounded out his day and not in a good way.

Izzy pushed the chair back to get at the spot and Nolan opened the door. *"I'll grab some cleaning supplies."*

Izzy waved. *"No, don't do that. You're already spending too much time with me and the baby."*

The words knocked Nolan back an emotional step. *"Too much time?"* He repeated numbly. It didn't compute with him stepping in and being a father in more ways than blood. Were they having a communication breakdown?

Izzy held Archie. *"At work. You're watching Archie too much. The complaint, remember?"*

He nodded, a slow movement that had nothing to do with how he felt. *"Right."* He glanced around, at the stain on the floor, at the squirming kid in Izzy's hands. How she would clean and watch him he hadn't a clue. *"But you need the help."* His gut constricted. *"Just not my help."*

Of course. Smart move for Izzy and Archie. Trouble flowed from him as easily as regurgitated milk from a baby. They could do without him.

"I'm sorry. I don't want either of us in trouble."

He glanced around the small space. If she tried to clean with Archie he'd get into the chemical. *"Why can't I help? You're working on my project."*

Izzy bit her lip, meanwhile Archie reached for Nolan as though he'd made his own decision. *"O.K.."*

Nolan grabbed the baby before the kid face-planted on the rug and headed for the front desk, with Archie gripping his shirt as though proclaiming Nolan as his own.

Not yet, kid, and possibly not ever in this building.

At the front desk he caught Shanice's attention. *"You have any cleaning supplies back here?"*

Shanice pulled out a roll of paper towels and handed it to him. *"What did the baby do?"*

Shouldn't this be his fault? Or none of his business? *"A little milk spit-up."*

Shanice handed over some cleaner. *"And look at him, happy as can be."*

Archie kicked, smile wide and drooling.

"I suspect he had a point system. He's accepting the rug as a decent score, but my shirt would have been worth more."

As if following along, Archie gave Nolan's shirt a good strong tug, wrinkling the fabric in his little hands.

Shanice laughed. *"Shirt would definitely have more points."* She leaned forward. *"Most points for keeping milk in your tummy."* She tickled Archie and the kid laughed and squirmed. *"He's such a happy baby. Izzy's done well with him."*

"Yes, she has."

"Don't get any ideas."

Nolan forced his smile not to fade. Crap, maybe Izzy had been right and he shouldn't have helped. *"Just helping out a*

fellow coworker."

He took the supplies and left before he made a stupid mistake and blew their cover.

At the small room, he handed Archie to Izzy and got down to scrub the area. She stood nearby, waiting on him, and he used a little extra chemical, just to be sure. He settled into a squat and looked up at her. *"Think that will work?"*

Izzy shrugged. *"Hope so. Let's keep the door open just in case."*

He nodded and collected the trash. *"Sorry about that."*

Izzy shook her head. *"Don't be. Archie's marked most of Levi's house with milk or pee. They had to replace the couch already; he got some into a hard to reach spot."* She grimaced.

"Good aim or bad aim?"

"Depends. Did he want your shirt or the rug?" She grinned, somehow getting him more than he thought possible.

Chapter Twenty-One

Izzy needed the baby to nap. She stood in Nolan's office, rocking the stroller back and forth, praying Archie took the hint. She didn't dare raise the visor and look at him, a surefire way to take him from almost asleep to wide awake in zero-point-two seconds. If Archie slept, she could help set up for the meeting and make sure her computer didn't freeze again.

Nolan ambled into the office, shoulders tense, mouth in a grim line. His nerves had continued to head in the wrong direction, and if he didn't relax soon, he'd mess himself up. Talk about being a self-fulfilling prophecy. She wanted to go to him, rub his shoulders, maybe even rub something else if it would help him out. But she needed to stay professional and with the stroller.

Nolan eyed her, as though she was the nervous one and not him. *"Need anything?"*

You to relax, she thought, but Izzy suspected he needed the distraction of worrying about someone else. She thought of something he could do while she continued rocking the stroller. *"My laptop for the meeting, it needs to be connected to the projector."* Or, at least that's what she tried to sign, but one-handed made her awkward signing more awkward than usual.

Nolan nodded as if she'd been perfectly clear. He left, and she racked her brain for any other missions she could send him on. She didn't know if busywork truly would help, but

until the baby slept, it was all she had. Izzy hummed a light song, not quite loud enough to be picked up by the hearing staff, but hoping to help aid Archie to slumber.

Maybe she should have begged Gaby to come home a few days early and take Archie for the presentation. But she wasn't ready to leave Nolan's apartment. And as much as she appreciated her sister's help, Nolan was more hands-on and a lot more fun.

Soon she'd be gone, and they hadn't worked out a damn thing on caring for Archie or what they were going to do about this thing between them.

And she really needed to corral her thoughts. She wasn't used to all this thinking time that having a baby gave her. She was used to action and movement, not being stuck in place because of a little human.

She'd work things out. She always did.

Nolan reentered and he glanced at the front of the stroller. *"He's asleep."*

"Really?" She didn't stop the moving.

Nolan nodded, a slightly amused curve to his lips. *"Really."*

Izzy slowly came to a stop and waited. No crying, no clapping, no noise. She inched around the stroller until she could peek inside. Archie's head lolled at an angle, pacifier unmoving, eyes closed in blissful sleep.

One of her boys was taken care of. Now she could address the other. *"You need to relax."*

Nolan lifted a shoulder, clearly trying to brush her off, but she knew his tells now, knew his shoulders didn't usually scrunch that high, his mouth didn't press that thin, and his eyes should have more shine to them—at least around her and Archie.

"Yes. You do. It's going to be O.K. You have a good presentation."

He nodded, but those shoulders didn't lower and those lips didn't puff up, so she moved to him, placing her hands on his shoulders and pressing into the hard muscles.

"Maybe I'm still a little stressed," he signed, mouth losing the grim line.

She laughed and kept on her mission, massaging him. His door was mostly closed, so she did the only other thing she knew to relax him. She kissed him. The intent was quick and sweet, but the moment their lips touched she got roped back under his spell. His arms went around her, angling to kiss her fuller. Izzy's knees weakened, and her massage turned into her holding on for dear life.

Wrong place, wrong time, but she couldn't stop. She shifted closer to him, wanting to feel the heat of him through their clothes, needing the pressure of his body against hers. Needing so much more than she had any right to.

He pulled back, and for several breaths they stood there, staring at each other. His shoulders didn't tighten, his mouth remained wet from her kisses. *"Thank you, but we should finish that later."*

Her body gave a little trill at the prospect of later. She knew how incredibly good it was with him. She wanted later; she wanted to keep it for a long, long, time.

Sure, her impulsive side had been tamped down by having a baby. But now it thrived again. She wanted to throw all caution to the wind and be with Nolan, raise their little family together. Jump in, both feet, no net. She had a funny feeling he'd catch her if they fell.

He moved to his desk, collecting paperwork. *"You ready?"*

"Yes." She was ready, for a lot more than the meeting.

...

Nolan's foot bounced at such a pace he almost wished Archie was on his lap as an excuse. But Izzy and the stroller stayed back in his office. The agency was closed; this meeting was happening after hours. Izzy claimed she hung around in case her computer didn't behave, but Nolan suspected his nerves were the real reason.

The meeting had begun, and he tried his hardest to pay attention, but he couldn't stop letting his presentation roll through his mind. The moment of truth nearly upon him. His need for this presentation to go well, for his ideas to be well received surged inside him, and no matter how hard he tried, he always prepared for another rocket incident to occur. He wouldn't let this moment join the rest. He had his script; it would all work out. Izzy believed in him. He'd do this well and then maybe he'd believe it, too.

Then he could go after his family as someone new. Someone better, someone they deserved. He wouldn't be dooming them to mistake after mistake. He could be the person they depended on and he wouldn't fail them. Whatever policy would keep them apart at work, he'd advocate for a change.

And once he conquered this meeting, he'd be ready.

Deanna turned the floor over to him and he stood, his tapping foot finally leveling off. *"Good evening and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to explain my role and my vision. As your new social media director, I want to update our programs and really bring us into the twenty-first century."*

"Our current technologies are behind, especially in comparison to other community agencies. Our social media presence was greatly lacking. Since I've started, I've gotten us onto multiple different platforms, managing the accounts with our new office assistant. We've answered a lot of questions and are bringing more of our information directly to our community."

He loaded the slideshow and pointed to the different platforms shown on the screen, reviewing each one, until an object flew by, as though attempting to be a late addition pointer. On the floor lay a pacifier.

Nolan glanced up at the door, where Archie sat, clapping.

Izzy appeared, scooping up Archie. *"Sorry, I'm so sorry. I was checking an email and I don't even know how he*

crawled so fast." Her cheeks were flushed.

Embarrassment about the situation tried to seep in, Nolan's tedious control over this one chance spiraling away. He pushed the concerns aside, determined to make it through.

"Excuse me." Nolan bent and picked up the pacifier, and after a quick wipe against his pants, he popped it back in Archie's mouth. The baby protested, but Nolan didn't have time to address it.

He faced the audience again, sitting around the three tables arranged in a square. *"Providing information in English isn't enough. Many of our consumers, of our community, prefer visual language. And yet our website is all English words. We need more videos, and I hope to do live chats as well in the future. With videos we can bring better quality of information to our community and catch up to how similar agencies conduct their business."*

He rubbed his sweaty hands down his pants and continued, daring a glance at the doorway. Izzy gave him a discreet thumbs-up and Archie clapped, and Nolan nearly wanted to laugh at the two of them and their synchronized family support. Izzy turned to leave and he nearly asked her to stay. He didn't, because he didn't need a cheering section. He needed the chance to succeed on his own. *"I've set up a video to give you one example of what we can show on our website, and I have a listing of other ideas focusing on each of the different programs."*

He stepped through the blinding light of the projector, over the cords and to Izzy's computer. He found the shortcut on the desktop titled "Nolan" and clicked on it, the media player springing to life.

He expected to see his face on the screen, instead he saw images of Archie. Younger Archie, one after the other, and instead of stopping the video, he stood there like an idiot as his presentation headed south in classic Nolan fashion. Of course it wouldn't matter how much control, or even how

calm he was, something always messed things up. Something always ripped his potential from him. Defeat and anger and some other unnamed emotion soared through him and he coughed to displace it, then moved through the blinding light again to pause the video.

He faced the room and forced a smile on his face. *"Sorry about that."*

Deanna looked at him, then the screen, and back again. When he turned he found an image of himself, on the couch, shirtless, asleep with an arm above his head. On his chest Archie slept in a similar position. The position called to attention their similar features, namely they had the same profile. He hadn't noticed that before. The image damned him, even without the similar features, it proved he and Izzy were more than coworkers.

This was it. His one shot up in smoke. No matter what he did, or where he went, trouble always found him. One issue after another. He hadn't a clue where he went from here. He'd somehow put both his and Izzy's jobs at risk, leaking their secret in the worst moment possible.

Nolan dropped his head before meeting Deanna's stare. *"You have been spending a lot of time with Izzy and the baby, then."*

He swallowed, the sensation akin to razor blades, and signed nothing. He hadn't a clue what he could possibly say to defuse the situation.

"Why don't you find the right video, and you and I can have a chat later."

Nolan ground his teeth. That didn't sound good, not at all. *Welcome to adulthood, Holtzman; you'll never leave your past behind.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Izzy bounced a wailing Archie, trying to calm the fussing baby. He'd refused milk and didn't need a diaper change. She couldn't put him down or he'd just crawl back to Nolan. She hated interrupting the meeting, and even a crying baby wouldn't have her interrupting them again. Archie finally settled down, though tiny whimpers still escaped. He gnawed on the pacifier rather than sucked, and Izzy probably needed to find something cold for his poor gums. Those teeth had better pop through soon.

She wanted to watch the meeting to see how it went. Nolan appeared to have it under control when she'd left, making his earlier worries for nothing. Her gut had absorbed those worries. She'd take all the anxious moments from him if it meant he wouldn't have to deal with them.

Footsteps, more like stomps, echoed in the hall, and Izzy looked up as Nolan entered. She halted her movements at the look in his eyes. They were cold, harsh even, and lasered in on their son. Archie whimpered, no doubt feeling the unease Izzy currently felt, and she tucked his head farther into her chest, protective Mama Bear mode engaged.

"Why was the wrong video labeled with my name?" Nolan's hand movements were as harsh as his eyes, and Izzy cringed, holding Archie tighter to her chest.

"You wanted the one with the program description." Crap, she shouldn't have left the other video on her computer, or at least renamed it. She cringed at the thought of what

images might have been displayed. Her pregnant self was not a good impression at a board meeting.

"I know that. Now. I needed to know that before the meeting."

Archie whimpered and she held him closer. She'd never seen Nolan this upset, this angry, and she didn't know what to do to make it better.

"You had an image of me in there."

Izzy shifted Archie, wanting to put him out of view but couldn't move. Not the reaction she had hoped to the one picture of father and son together. *"Yes. I thought you'd like it."*

He shook his head, jaw stiff. *"Maybe, but now the entire board knows there's more between us than coworkers."*

Like co-parents? She didn't dare sign that, but wasn't this always part of the point? They couldn't really hide Nolan's paternity indefinitely. *"We'll work something out. Let's grab your handbook, maybe if we read it together—"*

He waved, a harsh single swipe of his hand, cutting her off. *"It doesn't matter. They know. The meeting is a bust. I'll always be a screw-up."*

Nolan paced in a small circle, and Izzy took a step closer to the stroller, not liking the rigidness to his movements, the way his muscles practically strained against his beige dress shirt. *"Mistake. Everything is a mistake. Everything will always be a mistake. It's the same thing, over and over again. Everything I do spirals downward. I started a mistake. I'll end a mistake. And he'll share my same fate."* His dark gaze landed on Archie.

Izzy's heart broke in half and then reinforced with steel.

She calmly placed Archie in his stroller, pulled out his teething giraffe, and gave him a kiss on his forehead. She turned the stroller out of view before facing the man with whom she'd somehow managed to create a child. *"He's not a mistake. He never was a mistake. Unplanned? Yes. Wrong time? Perhaps. But not now and not ever a mistake."*

She ground her teeth, amazed her hands weren't shaking like Jell-O. *"But you, you are a mistake. A mistake to bring into his life. A mistake to bring back into mine. I thank you for giving me Archie, but I will not let you hurt him. Understand? You are not the man he will call Dad."*

She hadn't known she could string together that many words and didn't give a fuck if her signs were wrong or not. Nolan's shoulders dropped, so she bet on her argument being made loud and clear.

"That's my point. I am a mistake. I brought these mistakes to the next generation and I can't be anything more. I can't be his father."

Izzy winced at the words. Even though they mirrored her own, they still stung, and some of the steel pulled back as her heart bled for her son. Archie would never know her father, and now this brief week with Nolan would be all he had of his own. *"At least we agree."* She glanced around, a reminder that they worked together. But she no longer had a choice; she had to raise their child on her own. She tilted her chin, determined to keep the tears so far inside he'd never have a clue. *"You can communicate via email at work. I'll talk with Deanna about another arrangement. If either one of us still has a job."* Doubtful after what she'd learned about the reason for the no-dating policy. She held onto a slither of hope; if neither of them brought their personal strife into their jobs maybe, just maybe, they could keep them.

Izzy unlocked the stroller brakes and lowered the visor, trying to keep Archie in the dark. Nolan hadn't moved from the entrance and blocked their path. Izzy wished strollers came with a spikes option to ward off asshole sperm donors.

"I'll talk to Deanna and work something out," he signed.

Izzy shrugged, if anything could be worked out. *"Fine. Whatever. Move."*

Only Nolan didn't budge, and Izzy debated if the stroller had enough impact to hurt Nolan and not Archie. *"I didn't mean to mess up your life, too."*

Izzy took a deep breath and prayed for patience. *"You don't get it, do you? You didn't mess up my life until now."* He shifted to the side and she pushed past him. Once the stroller crossed the threshold to the hall she turned back. *"Thank you for showing your true colors. Now I know you were good for only one thing. That one night eighteen months ago. So thanks for the sperm, that's all we need from you."*

With those final parting words, she stalked down the hall, wheeling Archie to the stairs. She prayed Nolan wouldn't follow as she slowly moved the stroller down. He'd done it for her the past week, but now it was all on her.

Single mother. That was her status. And she was going to rock the hell out of that title.

Her heart tore, and it would take some time to recover. Tonight, when Archie was safely asleep and she was alone in her room at her sister's house, then she'd grieve.

Tomorrow morning she'd put this all behind her.

...

Nolan rubbed the sore spot in the center of his chest, the same spot each and every jab of Izzy's directly hit. He did what he had to do. Had to protect Izzy and Archie from any further harm he'd undoubtedly cause them.

So why did it feel wrong?

Every fiber in his being wanted to run after Izzy. But once he got to her he hadn't a clue what he'd do. Beg her to stay with a mistake? Hurt her more in the future? Because he knew his worth now, namely that he barely had any.

Best she learned that before things went too far.

Nolan shuffled back to the conference room, the tables set back to normal. The board members stood around in groups, chatting in lively animation. A different day and Nolan would have joined in on one of the conversations. Today he had only one goal in mind. Deanna. Instead of chatting, she

collected the lingering papers strewn about. What an epic failure his presentation had been. This meeting would top the rocket incident by the end of the day—and lucky him, he had an audience.

Suck it up, Holtzman. He took a fortifying breath, forced his shoulders back, and strolled up to the front of the room with more confidence than he'd ever felt. The others glanced his way but resumed their individual conversations. *"Sorry about what happened earlier,"* he signed once Deanna caught his eyes.

He searched her face for anger or the like, found nothing but her usual neutral stance. *"I have to share that we're impressed with the video, the actual video."* Her lips curved, a light teasing, but Nolan felt it like a sledgehammer. *"Can that play on our website?"*

"Yes. We might need to increase bandwidth as we get more videos on the site, but at the start it shouldn't pose a problem."

"This is all wonderful and exactly why we hired you in the first place. We need this update and rejuvenation to our website. Well done."

Her praise tasted like sawdust. He didn't deserve this, he didn't deserve anything. *"Anyone can do this, you don't need a screw-up."*

Deanna stepped in his direction, turning their conversation into a semi-private one. *"What do you mean screw-up?"*

He let out a breath. Fuck. Why had he mentioned that? Because this one little glimmer of success meant nothing, not anymore. *"Do I need to remind you my sign name?"*

"I think a rocket is better than a mole." Deanna's sign name, a *D* to the cheek, coincided with a dark mole she had there. *"We wouldn't have hired a screw-up. We hired a young member of our community with good ideas for the future."*

He nodded, at a loss of what to say or feel. A positive stirring attempted to break through, erase the past, but

thanks to his conversation with Izzy, he'd found a different way to mess up his life.

"I have good ideas, maybe, but I wasn't able to stop a social media blunder in New York." He forced his hands still—*stop signing!* He needed to keep his job, but he deserved nothing.

Deanna gave him a tight smile. *"Why don't you go to my office and I'll join you after I take care of these papers."*

Her face boded for not arguing. He shut up, knowing his comments were ruining things left and right, starting with Izzy, and at this point he'd managed to piss himself off. The board members glanced his way, an extra reminder he chose the wrong place and the wrong time to bring up any of this. He wondered if he'd succeeded in messing up even when things had gone well.

Once a screw-up...

He grabbed Izzy's computer, only instead of returning it he brought it with him to Deanna's office, loading the slideshow as he waited. Izzy'd made this for him. Because she believed in him. He didn't deserve it, certainly not now, but for one shining moment someone besides his mother had believed he was worthy.

It wasn't on their shoulders to manage his self-worth. He'd been hard on himself even before the rocket incident, a little kid who always had ambitions slightly out of grasp, and he knew damn well he beat himself up for not meeting unattainable goals.

His goals weren't unattainable anymore. Doing well in his job, being a father to Archie, both may be scary but he could do it. The control had been placed in his hands, secured there by his own insecurity. All he had to do was seize the opportunities and try his best.

A gear clicked, a lock turned. Life happened sometimes. A rocket had more power than expected, a wrong video played, a condom failed. It wasn't the events, it was the actions and reactions. He wasn't a screw-up because of

things beyond his control. He'd become a screw-up because he let it define him.

On the screen, images of Archie and Izzy played before him. Whatever happened, this kid was not a mistake.

He paused the video with Izzy, exhausted and beautiful, lying on a colorful comforter with a bundled-up, very young Archie on her chest. He should have been there. Maybe that's why she'd given him these images. As tired as she seemed, there was a peacefulness about her, a love she had for their kid.

No, Archie wasn't the mistake here.

The rest of the room held color and light, and he figured this was Izzy's room. She had one room at her sister's house and she filled it with life. It looked like a home, whereas his place looked like a place to sleep.

He had to fix this. The image combined with the no-dating policy damned them, but there had to be a work-around. They'd both been hired after Archie's birth. Nolan wouldn't let a policy affect them as parents, even if someone could argue they'd been dating—or something resembling dating—this past week.

He was still staring at the image when movement caught his attention, and Deanna settled in behind her desk. Nolan quickly closed down the laptop, ready to meet his fate.

"Small communities are a bitch sometimes," Deanna began, face not as somber as he expected. *"We all know one another, and know one another's stories, whether we truly know the person or not. I remember that rocket story from your youth, and I'll admit I laughed and perhaps wished I had done the same when I was a kid."* She sent him a smile, but too much tumbled in his stomach to respond.

"My point is this: I knew your history before you even applied for the job. I know there was a social media issue at your job in New York. The director there was the cause of that, and you better not be lumping that in with all this, because that issue was years in the making and continues

to unravel. I knew all of this and I didn't think once about being worried. Granted, if you brought in a rocket, maybe we'd have needed a talk."

He forced a smile at that. *"I'll have you know I don't own any rockets."*

"Good. I hired you because I saw a young man who knew his stuff and had the skills and heart to be what this agency needs. And I haven't regretted my decision. Until now."

He gulped but forced his gaze to stay steady on Deanna.

"I need a staff who will do their job, regardless of interruptions, as you've done. But I also need staff who can roll with the punches, and who know that mistakes happen and that we can fix them."

Nolan nodded, at a loss of what to say.

"Now, I also need to know what's going on with you and Izzy. The picture looked more like a father and son than a new friend helping out."

Nolan's thumbs twitched by his side fast enough that he'd win a video game fighting battle in two seconds flat. He had to force his thumbs still and accept the consequences of his fate. *"Archie's my son. Izzy and I met back when she barely knew ASL and..."* He flailed his hands, not really wanting to get into all the details of his one-night stand.

Deanna nodded, thankfully reading between the lines. *"I see. Did you know, when you started here? When she started?"*

Nolan shook his head. *"I didn't know until she told me. She couldn't find me before then."*

"Ohh. A lot makes more sense now, I have to admit."

"I know this is a conflict, but we both really need our jobs. Our connection predates our employment here, and we can work together regardless of any interpersonal issues we may have, as we'll have to work together to raise Archie." He prayed he hadn't messed things up and lost that opportunity. *"I know the no-dating policy affects us. I'd like to see it revised, or at least an exception given due to our*

unusual situation." He swallowed; this next part sucked for him, but he'd make it work. *"If that's not possible, Izzy needs this job more than I do. If we both can't work here I will gladly resign so she can stay."*

Deanna studied him, her face giving none of her thoughts away. *"I have to discuss this with the board. They added this policy after two employees dating made a mess not that far off from your experiences in New York. My question to you is this: are you the person I need, the one who knows mistakes happen and is ready to help fix them? I need to know my social media director will bring his A game, and if a rocket goes off, or his social media gets hacked, or he's having an issue with his son's mother, he'll work that into his presentation, rather than let it destroy it."*

She stood and tapped the desk. *"Let me know what you decide, and I'll contact the board in the interim. Deaf time means they are all still saying their goodbyes, and I'm about to take advantage of that."* She headed for the door, then turned, and her gaze shifted from employer to protector. *"You have other decisions to make, too, namely how you're going to handle what's going on between you and Izzy, and I don't mean the baby."*

And then she was gone, leaving him alone in her office, with Izzy's laptop, and pictures from the many months he'd missed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Izzy pushed her way into Nolan's apartment, shifting a random package out of her way, figuring she had only a limited amount of time to collect her stuff and get out before he arrived home and they had another face-to-face. One she did not want. Not now, not after everything that had gone down. She wanted to be a ghost and not one that brought up fond memories.

She wanted him to hurt.

She set Archie in his crib, ignoring his whimpers of discontent. She pulled out his suitcase and heaved in his clothes, pausing only to toss him a stuffed dragon when his whimpers increased.

The spiky dragon tail went into his mouth.

"Sorry, kiddo, we'll be on the road again soon. I just need to get our stuff from your... Nolan's house." She wouldn't deny Archie knowing that Nolan was his biological father. But right now, they needed space and clearly defined labels. If he wasn't going to live up to the role of father, then he didn't deserve the name.

Izzy's chest hurt, a slow persistent ache that looking at her son didn't do a damn thing to help. Of course she saw Nolan in his features now, knew what he'd inherited from his no-good father. She shoved the last few items into the suitcase and zipped it closed.

"We're in this on our own, kiddo. Just you and me, like we've been from the start." She sniffed back the moisture

threatening to spill. "We'll make it on our own. Aunt Gaby and Uncle Levi will be there to help."

God, she hated that, hated knowing she'd have to continue relying on her sister. Underneath that notion lay love and appreciation. She had a wonderful family, and because of them her son wouldn't lack for anything.

Except for his father.

But all this proved to her it was time. Time to figure out how she'd stand on her own two feet. If she kept her job, then she had an income. Possibly even child support. She had options, and she'd do best to explore them.

She shuffled into Nolan's bedroom, determinedly not looking at the still-rumpled bedsheets and reminders of their nights of lovemaking, and stuffed her belongings into her bag. The memories burned into her, slow and real, and she finally gave up and took in the bed, the memories growing stronger and faster. Dating again felt too raw, and she had to keep Archie her number one priority. Who knew when she'd next get her intimate itch scratched, so she'd keep these memories tucked close. She couldn't risk another person upsetting her life and Archie's.

Maybe one day, when all this felt like a distant dream, she'd try dating again, screening well before introducing the man to her son. Her happy family dream of two parents, two kids, and a dog had gone up in smoke, but that didn't mean she couldn't rebuild it in the future.

She took a minute as she zipped her bag to mourn the loss, and then dragged the bag into the living room. Time to move on. Her new dream involved her and her son, living on their own, happy in their two-person family.

Izzy gathered all the pureed food and baby supplies from the kitchen. The image wasn't hard to grasp. In many ways, she and Archie were already a family unit of two. Oh, life would be hard, but she'd make it work.

She had to.

Bags by the door, she pulled out her keys and stopped.

How could she manage this? She didn't dare take the items to the car while Archie stayed here, and certainly couldn't leave him in the car while she grabbed the rest.

This single parenting thing wasn't for the weak. Good thing that, for her, weakness never existed.

Izzy walked into the spare room, kid and dragon with soggy tail happy to see her. She picked up Archie and held him close, her emotional turmoil seesawing back and forth, the only constant being her love for this little guy. She propped him onto her hip and looked at the crib, still set up, and she wanted to cry.

"We don't need that, not for a while. We'll get it from Nolan later."

Then she made three trips, with a kid on her hip and a bag slung over the other arm. Sweat slid down her back as she finally buckled Archie in. She was tired and achy and ready to collapse and shut out life for a while.

Maybe when Archie started kindergarten.

On the drive back to her sister's home, her shell crumbled, and she navigated the road through watery eyes. Determination kept her going; she had Archie to protect, but she still sighed in relief as she parked in her usual spot at Levi's place.

And burst into tears.

Babbling came from the back seat, and she figured Archie either tried to make her feel better or told her to suck it up and get him out of the seat. The latter thought made her chuckle, and she wiped the tears off her cheeks as she exited the car and cuddled her child. He clutched her hair, baby version of a hug, and she held him tight. "We're going to be okay, kiddo. Just you and me. We'll be fine."

Izzy pushed into her sister's home, breathing in the familiar scents. Some construction dust and smells lingered, and she didn't know if they'd be back in the morning or if she had a working kitchen or not. None of it mattered at the moment; she'd figure it out later. The living room appeared

clean enough, and she set Archie down, collapsing to the couch, finally letting the full extent of her tears tumble. She had thought Nolan might be a match for her and Archie, that they could be a full family in all sense of the word. But anyone who considered her son a mistake, who could turn his back on them so quickly, wasn't worth their time.

As if the pain in her heart wasn't enough, embarrassment also competed for top billing. She hadn't meant for those images to be aired at a board meeting. And even though most of the people there knew her kid, it screamed of unprofessionalism. Made her feel like the twenty-three-year-old single mother barely holding it together that she was.

Made her feel like a mistake.

Nolan's words. Both her and Archie. An unwanted mistake.

She took in a shuddering breath and examined the living room. She still considered this place her sister's, or rather Levi's, since he'd lived here before he started dating Gaby. It wasn't her home, it was a place to stay and be safe during this transition period in her life.

Nolan's apartment had started to feel like home.

She'd find a new one.

Izzy brushed aside another stubborn tear, then scooped up the baby at her feet, holding him close. Archie gripped her hair, painfully, but her heart still swelled having him close. No, he wasn't a mistake. Unplanned, yes. Difficult timing, most definitely.

Not a mistake.

And if Nolan didn't see that, then he didn't deserve either of them. Her heart shattered, the happy family fantasy bursting into jagged pieces of glass, the kind with small enough fragments that you still stepped on something sharp months later.

She set Archie on the floor and unwound her hair from his sticky fingers, then picked up her phone and sent a text to her sister.

Izzy: Back at your place. Things ended with Nolan. When are you coming home?

Maybe it made her younger than her age, but she needed her sister's support. Gaby hadn't always been that person for her, but right now she needed the person who held her hand and fed her ice chips during her twelve hours of labor.

Gaby: What happened?

Izzy sniffled and swiped her cheek again.

Izzy: Saturday? Sunday?

Gaby: Soon if I can get my fiancé's attention.

Gaby: What happened?

Izzy shook her head as though her sister could see her.

Izzy: Long story.

Gaby: Short version please.

Izzy: He didn't want us.

It pained her to type those words and send them. Her new future became etched in stone. She didn't need a man in her life, and Levi could be the father figure Archie needed. She'd tried to hold on to the image she had as a kid, of getting married and starting a family. After having Archie, she shifted it to finding someone to love them both. Nolan had been the perfect fit for a brief moment in time, and after him she doubted she could put her heart out there again.

"Looks like it's just you and me for this life, kiddo," she said, brushing back the few wispy hairs of the infant holding himself up on her knees.

He grinned, as though everything was perfect. He had Nolan's smile, the realization hit her square in the gut. Her heart ached again, but she pushed the pain down.

Eventually, they'd forget how good Nolan had fit with them. In the end, it would be Nolan's mistake that they'd

focus on.

...

Nolan pushed into his apartment, stumbling over a package waiting by the door. He kicked it inside the living room, scanning the area in the fervent hope that even though Izzy's car wasn't outside, they'd somehow be there and he could fix things. But no one waited for him, and his living room no longer held any random items from Izzy or Archie, as though they'd been a figment of his imagination.

Or ghosts.

He raced down the hall to his room, finding it with the same eerie stillness. Only the rumpled sheets gave him any indication that he hadn't dreamed the past week. Panic surged, and he ran to Archie's room in one last attempt. No bouncing baby there to greet him. Only the crib remained.

They weren't here.

He returned to his living room, a bland, lifeless, colorless excuse of a space. He didn't know how he had lived like this, hadn't a clue how he could go back to it now. They had brought their own special magic into his life, by means of their color and vibrancy. He'd barely noticed his own belongings with them around, the place had transformed. And now the magic act had finished, leaving him as hollow as his apartment.

They'd left behind an empty shell of a life. His.

He wanted to go after them, but he had no idea where Izzy lived. He had her number, though, and typed a text.

Nolan: *I'm sorry.*

It wasn't much, and he'd figure something else out. It was a start.

Nolan picked up the package that he'd kicked aside when arriving and moved to his kitchen. He needed to do something big but was unsure what would even work. He grabbed a knife and pried open the box, dumping the

contents. The baby cry alarm fell to his table. Talk about an item arriving two seconds too late. He should have been setting it up, ensuring Izzy wasn't the only one responsible for their son tonight. He should have been putting Archie to sleep, then taking Izzy into his arms.

Instead he'd screwed it up.

Not the meeting; the meeting had gone surprisingly well, even with the photo reveal. His family, *that* he messed up.

He shouldn't have let them go.

Now he had the biggest challenge of his life—fixing one of his mistakes. And he hadn't the first clue how. More than that, how did he get Izzy to believe him?

His phone vibrated and he yanked it out, hoping it was Izzy. It wasn't.

Mom: *How's it going?*

He held the phone in his hands until the message faded and the screen went black. His mother had been waiting patiently, letting him figure out things with Izzy and Archie. She had a habit of somehow knowing when he needed her, so her timing didn't surprise him.

He found the one picture he had of Archie on his phone and sent that to his mother. It tugged at him deep inside, like it had when he took the picture in the first place, and he wondered why he hadn't taken a million more. He wished he had the one Izzy had taken, and a sudden pang of loss hit him. His kid was nine months old and that was the first—and only—picture of them together.

Mom: *Is that him? He looks like you did.*

Nolan: *That's Archie.*

An incoming video call came two seconds later. He answered it to see his mother's face too close to the screen. She pulled back enough to sign. "*Where is he? Is he awake?*"

He cringed and knew his mother caught it. "*He's not here.*"

I messed things up, again. Come over. I'll explain."

His mother shook her head. *"Let that go, no excuse. I'll see you soon."* Her image left and he put the phone down.

His empty living room mocked him, and the change in a week had him scratching his head. Last week he'd been happy here alone, playing a video game, eating chips out of the bag, drawing when it suited him, maybe contemplating finding a date. He'd had no plans of settling down, of being a family guy. Now that was all he wanted.

His family back.

He opened the cry alarm, reading through the instructions. He hadn't a clue if Izzy would even let him see Archie again, and a small part of him died inside at the thought.

No, he'd fix things. He wouldn't be his no-good father. He'd be better.

Twenty minutes later he opened the door to his mother with her short bob of salt-and-pepper hair, hands firmly on her hips. She whacked him on the back of the head by way of greeting. *"I wanted to meet that cute baby."*

He rubbed the spot, even though she hadn't hurt him. *"I know. I wanted you to meet him."*

"What are you going to do?"

The question of the hour, the one he had to get right. *"I'm trying to figure that out."*

"You have a choice."

No, he didn't. Maybe before he got to know Archie and Izzy, but giving them up wasn't an option. *"Izzy doesn't."*

A small smile graced his mother's face. *"I knew I raised you right."* She kissed his cheek. *"So much better than your father."*

Nolan blinked, sure he saw those signs wrong, but knew he didn't. *"What do you mean?"*

"Your father, he didn't care. Parenthood wasn't meant for him. The decision with my pregnancy, with all of it, was up to me, and my choices didn't matter; he made his own. He did that when I first found out about you, after you were

born, and again when I discovered your deafness. You're not him. You never were him."

He let those words settle over him. Genetics or not, he wasn't his father. The thanks for that lay in his mother's capable hands. He hadn't seen it, hadn't realized he didn't need to worry. History may have repeated itself in the failed condom, but not in the failed father role.

His mother moved into the kitchen, eying the box he'd had delivered. *"Good. Smart."*

"Will it be enough?"

His mother moved to him and cupped his cheek, eyeing him too carefully. *"It's not just the baby, is it?"*

He shook his head.

Now her smile came full-on. *"Good. Better. Now, what are we going to do about it?"*

Nolan hadn't the first clue. But his living room came into view behind his mother, and a small idea began to sprout. He didn't know if it would be enough, but perhaps it could be a start.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Izzy stared at the ceiling as she lay in bed, sleep refusing to claim her. The bed didn't feel right—mattress too firm, sheets too soft, blankets lying different than before—and she couldn't get comfortable. In reality the bed itself was fine, certainly better than her dorm room regulation XL twin, or the lumpy full bed from her youth. She doubted Nolan's bed was better quality, but instead it had to do with the man himself.

Izzy rolled over, frustrated by her own thoughts. She didn't have time for a sleepless night, and if she didn't get shut-eye soon, that's exactly what awaited her. Most nights exhaustion had her crashing the moment her head hit the pillow. Tonight, her broken heart kept her awake.

Ugh. She rolled over again, bunching the pillow under her head, and closed her eyes. All her focus shifted to her breathing, pushing out all thoughts and emotions, until mind and body drifted to a peaceful—

Archie's cries ripped her from imminent slumber. Her eyes popped open and she punched her pillow. "Go to sleep, kid," she grumbled in the dark, but the cries continued, not caring his mommy needed a night off.

Izzy got out of bed and picked up a crying Archie. She rocked him and gave him the pacifier, but he spat it out. She moved to nurse him, but he pushed her away. No matter what she did, he refused to calm down. All her drained energy turned to frustration; she had nothing left to give,

and her kid wouldn't shut the fuck up.

Her tears joined Archie's, and she was seconds away from losing it all. She trudged into the living room, hoping a change of scenery or light would make a difference. Archie's tears slowed as he looked around, but whatever he wanted wasn't there, and the volume rose, grating on Izzy's last nerve. She turned to her bedroom, ready to put him down in his crib and go for a walk before being able to parent, when the front door opened and in walked Gaby and Levi.

Izzy cried harder.

Gaby made a beeline to her and pulled her into a hug. Then she plucked Archie from Izzy's hands and handed him to Levi. He took the baby, and all the commotion must have startled him, because the only one left crying was Izzy.

"Why are you here?" Izzy signed only, her throat raw and scratchy after the long day.

Gaby rubbed Izzy's shoulder. *"You needed us."*

Beside her Levi nodded. *"Need me to punch the man?"*

A small laugh choked Izzy's tears. *"No. Maybe."* She shook her head. *"No."* Nolan wasn't a weakling, but Levi loved the gym and could do more damage than necessary.

"What do you need?" Gaby asked.

Izzy swiped at a tear. *"I don't know."* For Nolan to want her and Archie. *"I had hoped it would work out."*

Gaby's eyes narrowed. *"For who? You or Archie?"*

Izzy shrugged, knowing her sister would catch the real answer.

Gaby pulled her into a hug. "It's going to be O.K. One way or another. You're a great mother for Archie, and he's got the rest of your family. If Nolan can't get his shit together, Archie won't miss a thing. And you'll find someone who loves you both."

Izzy wasn't so sure about the last part, but she kept it to herself. "I know, but it felt so real when I was with him." Izzy pulled back and wiped her eyes. "It felt—" She glanced at Levi, who rocked Archie, not at all upset that they had

switched to spoken English. "It felt like what you two have." Izzy moved her hands along with her words.

Archie made a sound and struggled out of Levi's arms. Once on the ground, he crawled over to Izzy's computer that she'd left open and on, with her picture slideshow scrolling across the screen. The image of Nolan and Archie faded, and Archie began crying.

Izzy got up and woke up her computer, bringing up the only picture she had of Nolan, never mind with Archie. The baby clapped, bouncing as he stood holding onto the coffee table where Izzy had her computer. Her throat tightened.

"I guess the feeling is mutual," Gaby said.

Izzy pressed a kiss to her son's head. "I know, kiddo. I know. But I don't think he wants us the same way." Still, she left the picture up, let Archie babble with his hands at his father, praying he would soon forget, ignoring how the sight broke her heart further.

...

It took Nolan an hour to get rid of his mother. First he had to tell her everything he knew about his son, then about Izzy. He finally got her to go look for his old baby stuff at her home, giving him breathing room to work on his plan. Step one involved computer research. If he was going to make it work, he needed to move mountains, fast, and be granted a big miracle. But, as with the cry alarm, he wanted to do things right, and being caught between right and fast was a precarious place. One small issue could tumble the entire plan.

He sent a text to Bo.

Nolan: *Does your friend still have that truck?*

Bodhi: *Yeah. Why?*

Nolan let out a breath. He wasn't good at asking for help, but desperate times called for stepping outside of his

comfort zone.

Nolan: *I need a favor.*

Bodhi: *You mess things up?*

He ground his teeth together, even if he knew Bo would see straight through him.

Nolan: *Naturally.*

Bodhi: *You going to fix things?*

Nolan: *Why do you think I need the truck?*

Bodhi: *To hide a body?*

Nolan rolled his eyes and focused on the item on his screen, the one he needed ASAP.

Nolan: *No, and I don't have time for this, I need to get my family back.*

Bodhi: *Your family?*

The word should have sent a chill through him. Instead it sent a sensation of rightfulness, of belonging. Archie and Izzy were for life.

Nolan: *Yes.*

Bodhi: *Good. I'll be there in a few.*

The sun had set hours ago, but apparently neither of them had a problem with that. Nolan went back to his multiple browsers, checking the availability, figuring out where he needed to go in person. The odds of pulling this off were slim to none, but he didn't want to wait another moment.

The apartment felt sparse and empty without Izzy and Archie. *He* felt sparse and empty. Yeah, he'd always messed things up, had a real talent for it. Now he had a chance to fix his mistake, to make things right, and he'd do whatever it took.

Funny how he spent his entire life believing one thing,

when it was the belief holding him down. Now he had a reason to rise above, a reason to be more than he thought he was. And if he failed, he'd get back up and try again.

He settled in at his computer, opened up his drawing program. While he waited for Bo, he'd get started on a non-scenery-related project, something special to help pull off his plans. If he failed, this little reminder would suck, but he'd deal with that if he had to.

He tugged at his collar, undid another button. He really didn't want to fail. But he'd keep trying, keep doing what he could to make things right. Because even if he'd damaged things beyond repair with Izzy, Archie was still his son. And he refused to let history repeat itself. Archie would damn well know him as his father.

But first, he really needed that truck.

...

The following day, Izzy had one goal. To avoid Nolan. Archie was safe at home with his aunt and uncle, although he did cry as Izzy left. Gaby assured her he'd calmed down since then, but Izzy had guilt clawing at her insides. Foolish, really, since Archie had been glued to her and Nolan's hip while her sister was away.

She really needed to find a day care she could afford.

No, scratch that. If she got day care, she'd never find an apartment. Apartment first, and she'd start looking soon. For now she had her support system back and a job to keep.

And, bonus, there no longer existed a conflict between her and Nolan. Unless the policy had an issue with them already having a kid, jobs could hopefully be salvaged. Hers, at least. She didn't care much about Nolan's at the moment.

"Where's my friend?" Shanice asked in both languages as soon as Izzy walked in the door.

Izzy forced a smile. "My sister's back home, so he's with his aunt today."

Shanice frowned. "Aww, I'm going to miss him. Before I forget, Deanna wants to see you." Izzy sucked in a breath. She had no idea what had happened after she left and should have anticipated this.

She waved to Shanice and made her way to Deanna's office. She flicked the light and entered, relieved to find the woman behind her desk. *"I'm sorry about the meeting last night."*

Deanna waved a hand. *"It's fine. The baby was a cute interruption."*

Izzy settled into a chair. *"You wanted to see me?"*

"I did. I talked with Nolan after the meeting. Have you talked with him?"

Izzy shook her head. *"No, there's nothing between us." Any more.*

Deanna's eyes narrowed. *"But he's Archie's father."*

Izzy bit her lip and fought the urge to turn and run away. She could find another job somewhere, perhaps in a different state? No, she couldn't run away, not anymore. She needed to be stable for Archie. And speaking of Archie, it was time to stop hiding the truth. *"Yes, he is, but that won't be a problem."*

Deanna's face said she didn't believe Izzy, but she didn't call her on it. *"I had a talk with Nolan yesterday, and then with the board, since they hadn't left and were here chatting. That no-dating policy becomes complicated when it applies to your situation."*

Izzy didn't dare breathe. Clearly Deanna knew of her history with Nolan, more than she would have preferred, but understandable.

"Nolan vouched for you. I want you to know that. If the board had decided only one of you could stay he had requested you keep your job."

Shock slithered through Izzy. *"He did what?"*

Deanna's face softened. *"He did that. And the board realized that the issue we had with two staff dating in the*

past applied more to them than others. They like Nolan's work, and your work, and respect both of your attempts to keep your personal life outside of work. That shows you can work together."

Izzy's head bobbed, and she feared she wouldn't be able to stop.

"The policy has been removed. If you and Nolan are comfortable working together, then we have no problem."

After the fight and everything, could they still work together? Izzy squared her shoulders. She'd do it, whether she was on good terms with Nolan or not. *"I can work with him."*

"Good. If there are any problems, come to me; don't let it affect your job."

Izzy nodded, scared to believe this was real. She'd expected challenges as a single mother, and to realize she'd landed in the right place didn't seem like her luck. And in typical Izzy style, she wanted to press that luck. *"In the future, might it be possible to work from home a day or two a week? For the reason of childcare coverage?"* She bit her lip, hoping she hadn't taken a good thing and thrown it out the window. In order for her plans to work, for her to stand on her own as much as possible, she needed this option.

"I don't see why not, but let's discuss this in more depth when you start seriously considering it."

"Thank you." It wasn't a guarantee, but it was another door opened, another avenue to be explored. A few puzzle pieces sliding into place. She'd do this single mother thing, and Archie would have everything he needed.

"Nolan's not in today. I don't know what's going on between you two, but I can respect you have a lot to work through."

Unsure how to respond, Izzy nodded. She didn't know why Nolan wasn't in, and as she stood to leave, a thought occurred to her. *"The presentation, was it good?"*

"Very good. The board was impressed with the video and

Nolan's initiative, and we know you helped with a lot of that."

"*Thank you.*" Nolan's ideas, but she left before she opened that can of worms, and dropped her pumping supplies off at her converted nursing room. She walked by Nolan's office, the door wide open and the room dark, and felt a strange sensation at his absence.

She didn't have to worry about avoiding him; he already did it for her. Which meant they were truly over. She'd take the weekend, stock up on ice cream, maybe some alcohol if she wanted to pump and dump. Then next week she'd work on getting over him and figure out how he wanted to be in his son's life.

If he wanted to at all.

At the entrance to her work area she found Lisa already at her desk, typing happily along, bopping to some song in her head. Lisa looked up, a smug grin on her face. "I heard, about you and Nolan. I guess you'll be leaving now." She flicked a hand, as if dismissing Izzy.

Izzy dropped her items at her desk, put her hands on her hips. She'd start signing if anyone Deaf came into the area. "You're the one who complained about Archie." It wasn't a question.

"A kid doesn't belong at work."

"You give Shanice the same grief?"

"Shanice didn't steal my job."

Izzy rolled her neck, too tired and emotionally distraught for this. "I still have my job. And so does Nolan. They changed the policy. For us." She threw that last line in as a jab.

Lisa huffed. "It won't last."

"The policy change or Nolan?" She shook her head. "You know what, it doesn't matter. Since you assume one of us has lost our job, then you know Nolan is Archie's father. And none of this is any of your business." She didn't know if Lisa's only problem was the job or if something else had

rubbed the woman wrong, but Izzy didn't care. "I'm going to be the bigger person here and wish you well. Deanna already knows who complained. And that might have something to do with the fact that I have the job you wanted in the first place."

Perhaps her words were petty, but Lisa had it coming. With the woman's jaw hanging open, Izzy made her way back to her desk; she had more important things to deal with at the moment. She loaded the video she had made of all of Archie's pictures and sent it to Nolan. Maybe her instinct reeked of passive-aggressive behavior, but she made it for him, and he had a right to these images of their baby. He'd have to deal with his own emotional reaction before he made up his mind about what the future held. She wanted to be damn sure he knew what he lost.

Chapter Twenty-Five

There, almost perfect.

Nolan closed the door behind Bodhi and headed to the kitchen to clean out the pizza boxes and plates. A small price to pay for Bodhi's help that day. It had been twelve hours of running around, loading up the borrowed truck—twice—and rearranging. Nolan was more tired than when Archie had kept him up all night, but the thought of that sweet little boy, and Izzy, kept him fueled.

Now he wanted to collapse but couldn't. Not until he saw his plans all the way through. Jumping headfirst into things had always backfired in the past, but Bodhi and Nolan's mom insisted this time things would work out.

He wasn't a screwed-up kid anymore. He'd grown into an adult. Yes, one that still made mistakes, and would continue to make them. But his mistakes would no longer define him.

Nolan wiped down the counter, then surveyed his transformed apartment. His hands shook as he fixed a picture that didn't need fixing. He went back to the computer, to the images Izzy had collected for him, scrolling through all the pictures of his son. It had taken him a full half hour to get his mother to stop tearing up over her grandson, and Nolan couldn't blame her, not with how his chest constricted at the sight.

He paused it on a picture of Izzy with a very young Archie, all skin and bones and none of the rolls of baby fat the kid had now, with large navy-blue eyes. But it was Izzy's smile

that caught him. Here she was, a single mother, her life thrown off course, and yet happiness radiated from her.

He wanted to be part of that happiness. He wanted to be her world. Time would tell what he managed to accomplish. But he wouldn't give up on his family.

He pulled out his phone and set up a text to Izzy.

Nolan: *I have Archie's crib. Can you come over?*

He held his breath as he hit send. She could tell him to go screw himself and he wouldn't blame her. But he really needed her to visit.

Nolan sent up a silent prayer, needing this one small moment to go his way.

...

Izzy stared at the text, thumbs airbrushing the words. A part of her wanted to retort that he could drop off the crib, and she'd ask Levi to flex at the door. Screw that, Gaby could flex as well.

A stronger part of her wanted to see him. A chance to close the book on them once and for all.

"Nope. Absolutely not," Gaby said. "I'll go. Where does he live?"

Izzy turned to her sister standing behind her, arms crossed, already flexing. Yeah, her sister had her back.

"No. I need to go." Izzy picked Archie up and handed him to her.

Gaby took him, her face creased in concern. "You don't have to."

Izzy rubbed her son's head. "I do. I need a moment without Archie so I know where Nolan stands with his son."

Gaby let out a breath but fixed the baby onto her hip. "I can come with you. Or Levi can."

Izzy shook her head and gave Archie a kiss. "No. I'm a big girl, let me handle this on my own." She got herself into this situation by sleeping with Nolan in the first place, she'd see

it through to the end.

"If you change your mind..." Gaby gestured to the key rack.

Izzy took hers off. "I know where to find you."

She needed this moment with Nolan without Archie to care for. When she could yell or cry and swear as needed. When her attention and needs wouldn't be divided.

She needed to walk away from this on solid ground, knowing what to expect for herself and her son.

Her bravado faltered as she stood at Nolan's door, his spare key in hand, ready to ring his doorbell, grab her stuff, and give back his key.

Izzy checked her phone, part as distraction, and found the message she hadn't even known she needed until she saw it.

Gaby: Archie is fine. Go do what you need to.

And, because clearly her sister not only talked to her fiancé, but also ordered him around as needed, the second text.

Levi: That offer to come punch him still stands.

Izzy chuckled, envisioning the pair behind her with their muscles on display, and took the moment of relief to ring the doorbell, knowing a light would flash inside.

She shuffled the toe of her shoe on the carpet as she waited, nerves kicking back in, knowing it might take some time for a deaf person to catch the light. Therefore she was unprepared when the door swung open two seconds later and Nolan stood before her.

He hadn't shaved that day, and his hair was disheveled. Bags hung under his eyes, and she didn't think it had anything to do with the time Archie stayed here. He looked like shit, and it gave her a small flicker of hope. "Hi," she waved.

"Hi," he waved back, nerves practically bouncing off him.

"Come on in." He stepped back to let her by, and she spotted Archie's crib partially folded in a corner. Her heart sank, straight to her toes before obliterating. She hadn't realized she clung to a flicker of hope that he might still want them until that moment, and was unprepared for the sharp thrust of hurt. So this was the end. Archie would be crushed, but he'd recover and never know any different.

Izzy stepped into the apartment and when her gaze left the haphazardly folded crib, she froze. The apartment looked like a different place.

The couch had been pushed aside, blocking outlets and vents, a child-size soft chair set up next to it. The remaining outlets had safety protectors. Colorful pillows sat on the couch, Nolan's snow-covered tree drawing hung on the wall, and a child's chest sat in the corner, as though it could hold toys.

Confusion and heartache still worked through Izzy. She didn't understand everything, but clearly Nolan wasn't giving up on Archie.

Just her.

Her insides tore, and she had to stuff her emotions down. She lifted her chin, refusing to fall apart in front of him. She'd do so later, in her car, alone. *"Looks different,"* she managed, a weak smile barely making it to her lips before she couldn't hold it up any longer.

"There's more." Nolan headed for the spare bedroom, and Izzy blinked a few times, doing her best to keep her hurt and her tears inside. She entered the room to a changed space. The computer desk and futon had been removed, in its place a baby crib, changing table/dresser, and rocking chair. The room was filled with blues and greens, with a frog rug in the center.

It looked nice, homey even. Archie would be happy here when he stayed. Izzy couldn't keep the smile on, her eyes watering, but her stubbornness keeping the tears inside. *"So you want to discuss..."* Crap, what was the sign? *"C-U-S-T-O-*

D-Y?" Her hand shook so much she wasn't entirely sure she spelled the word correctly, or any word.

Goodness, couldn't he have mentioned this in his text? Then she could be prepared, rather than fighting a losing battle at keeping herself together in front of him.

Nolan shook his head. He moved to her, one hand raised as if he planned to touch her cheek. She reeled back, not wanting his touch, and he lowered the offending arm. He wrapped his hand around hers instead, and his warmth caused one traitorous tear to slip. She needed to rip her hand away, but his touch soothed a small part of her turmoil and she didn't want it to end. He pulled her out of the room and into his bedroom.

The first thing she noticed was his desk now lined a wall, making the space a bit cramped but livable. Then she found a monitor with an image of the crib on-screen. Of course, she left and he got himself a baby monitor. He made a home here for him and Archie and the fear of losing her son hit her so hard she barely registered that the comforter had changed.

A lovely teal color with a floral pattern lined the bed that had previously been a drab beige color. Extra pillows sat near the headboard, with rose petals scattered on top of them all. Above on the wall was another picture, this one a drawing of Nolan, Archie, and Izzy. It resembled all those posed family photos. Not an image of Archie alone, or Archie and Nolan, but an image of them as a family.

Izzy's gaze darted to Nolan, who finally stepped into the room. He rubbed his hands together, but his eyes were on her, full of emotion. And it clicked; this wasn't a home for him and Archie, this was a home for all three of them. Her broken heart took a tentative step back to whole, as hope and promise repaired the internal hurt and pain.

"I'm sorry for my behavior yesterday," Nolan began. *"I've been the kid who messed up my entire life and thought I needed that presentation to go perfectly in order to break*

my streak. The wrong video wasn't the mess-up, my reaction was." He rubbed his neck. *"But the only person still viewing me as a screw-up was myself, and I took my fears out on you and Archie when I shouldn't have."*

"I never had a traditional family life, never knew my biological father. And because of all that, I never thought I wanted it for myself. Yet there's this kid now, and there's you, and I'm so afraid of fucking things up that I've risked losing you both."

He pointed to the monitor. *"I ordered this after the first night you stayed up with Archie. It arrived yesterday, imperfect timing. And I thought of what you had said about this being a home. I want this to be a home. A home for all of us."* He took a breath.

A second tear escaped, but this time a happy one.

"I got an idea of your style from the pictures you sent me. And thank you for them. We can change anything you don't like; I just want my family back."

Izzy rubbed her aching chest, lost in the depth of emotion in his brown eyes. *"Family?"*

A shaky smile crossed Nolan's face, the blond stubble catching the light. *"Yes. Family. A little backward, but I don't think we'll ever be completely traditional. Still, I want to make things right. I want you in my life. Not because of Archie. Because I love you."*

Izzy's heart wanted to burst.

Nolan reached into his pocket and then—dear God—lowered to one knee. *"We already have the kid, but I can't imagine my life without both of you. I may be a year and a half too late, but will you marry me?"*

More tears fell down Izzy's cheeks. She hadn't had an opportunity to rush into anything in a while, and this time it didn't feel like a risk. This time, it felt like home. *"I love you, too. Yes."*

Nolan slipped the simple solitaire on her finger. It wouldn't win any competitions against her sister's ring, but it was

hers and it was perfect. Nolan rose and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her with all the passion he had.

Yes, this was home.

Epilogue

Izzy yanked up her skirt in order to squat, dragging the twenty-month-old out from under her sister's billowing dress. "What do you have, Thomas engines under there?"

Gaby laughed, fixing her skirts. "Nothing of the sort, and with the peeping nephew be glad I didn't go for anything extra special for my soon-to-be husband's eyes only."

Izzy shifted Archie in her arms, her sister's wide smile damn near blinding. "I guess I should thank you for that." With her free hand she fired off an SOS text to Nolan: *Toddler unable to be contained.*

The original plan had been to let Gaby and Levi get married first, but as Archie's first birthday approached, waiting seemed pointless. So in true Izzy fashion, they decided not to wait on a Monday, and had a courthouse wedding that Friday. Small, simple, and absolutely perfect.

Archie squirmed in her arms, and unable to hold him longer, she set him on his feet, where he baby ran over to the Thomas train he'd left on the floor. Izzy stretched, rubbing her aching back, as her phone vibrated.

Nolan: *Help has arrived. Coast clear?*

She did a quick scan around the room, but everyone had been dressed for some time now, before opening the door.

Nolan's wide smile greeted her. He gave her a quick kiss that never ceased to weaken her knees, before moving into the room. He squatted and held out his arms, and Archie

looked up and spotted the newcomer.

"Daddy," he yelled, voice only, and ran into his father's arms. The kid was bilingual, but at this age switching between languages was a common occurrence.

Nolan scooped up the toddler and settled him on his hip. *"When do you need him back?"*

Izzy turned to Gaby, who checked the clock on the wall. *"Twenty minutes?"*

Nolan nodded and tossed Archie into the air, ringing peals of laughter from the kid, before sending Gaby a thumbs-up.

"And how are you doing?" he asked, brushing his free hand over Izzy's stomach.

"Doing anything she can to get out of wearing that dress, including getting pregnant."

Izzy rolled her eyes, not bothering to check if her sister had signed, but judging by the extra rub to her growing belly, she guessed she had.

"Not my fault you waited so damn long to get married." She shot the parting words over her shoulder, but kept her gaze on Nolan and the smile on his face. They decided they wanted their kids to be close in age, and with Archie nearing his second birthday, the timing felt right. Nolan had come a long way from the man who believed himself to be a screw-up and worried about being too much like his father.

No, this man was hands-on with their son, and would be with their daughter. He gave Izzy everything she could have wanted in a family.

But today wasn't about them, and with all the stress of planning a big wedding, she became more and more grateful for her little quickie union.

It matched her and Nolan, like this big affair matched Gaby and Levi.

"Go tire him out so he doesn't run down the aisle and throw the pillow."

Archie bounced in Nolan's arms. *"Throw!"*

Uh-oh.

Nolan laughed. *"You've done it now. Kid's got good aim, too."* Then he flipped Archie over his shoulder and left the room.

Izzy smoothed down her dress, tugging it over her stomach. She'd planned everything, just forgot one simple fact—second pregnancies show earlier than first. The dress barely zipped, but it fit and she needed it to last only a few more hours.

Today she'd be happy for her sister, and in a few months she'd welcome her second child into the world. She didn't quite know how she got so lucky, how that random one-night stand and failed condom worked out so well. But she'd take it.

Izzy rubbed her stomach at the soft little flutter. Lucky indeed.



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Acknowledgments

Each book has a different path; each set of characters demands a different journey. From the start, Izzy and Nolan had a slightly more serious tone to them, their origin story weighing heavily over them. Archie was the one there for the laughs, and helped create most of them, keeping his parents in line. To help me write Archie I set up a folder on my desktop with a few special images and memories of my own kid at nine months, to remind me of those times long ago. The sweet baby smiles, the cuddles, the diapers, I wanted to bring all of that to this story and not have a baby character as a silent prop, but causing interruptions, as babies do.

Thank you to the Entangled team, especially Liz Pelletier and Lydia Sharp. I feel honored to be able to continue this series and journey with you all!

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To my family: My writing takes up a lot of my time, and takes me away from you. Thank you for believing in me and

supporting me. It means the world.

To my readers old and new: Thank you for reading, for taking a chance on me. I hope I have given you entertainment, and hope I get to do so again!

About the Author

After spending her childhood coming up with new episodes to her favorite sitcoms instead of sleeping, [Laura Brown](#) decided to try her hand at writing and never looked back. A hopeless romantic, she married her high school sweetheart. They live in Massachusetts with their two cats and kid. Laura's been hard of hearing her entire life but didn't start learning ASL until college, when her disability morphed from an inconvenience to a positive part of her identity. At home the closed captioning is always on, lights flash with the doorbell, and hearing aids are sometimes optional.

Also by Laura Brown

[MATZAH BALL SURPRISE](#)

Find love in unexpected places with these satisfying Lovestruck reads...

[RACHEL, OUT OF OFFICE](#)

a novel by [Christina Hovland](#)

Single mom Rachel Gibson seriously needs a break. Between an absent ex-husband, rowdy twin boys, and running her own work-from-home business, her candle isn't just burning at both ends, it's a full-blown puddle of wax. She's the go-to girl for other entrepreneurs, handling all the tasks they dread. Social media posts? She's got it. Website updates? She's on it. Light bookkeeping? She loves it.

Thank goodness Rachel's about to get a reprieve, as her former in-laws plan to whisk her boys away for a summer of fun at the family lake house. But when her ex backs out at the last minute, she finds herself in a pickle. Even though she's drowning in to-dos, she's horrible at saying no—especially when it comes to providing some stability for her kids.

Once Rachel arrives at the lake house, she struggles to keep up with work and balance the demands of family, all the while fending off pesky new feelings for her ex-brother-in-law. Which makes her wonder...is falling for her ex-husband's brother just one more messy complication added to the dumpster fire of her life? Or is anything possible when she's out of office...?

[THE DATING ITINERARY](#)

a novel by [Brooke Williams](#)

Budding reporter Penny has been tasked to write a series of features called "The Dating Game." And the icing on the unwanted cake? Every dating avenue she tries, her arrogant, know-it-all rival George just. Keeps. Showing. Up. Geo's about to have the chance of his own syndicated column, and help his sister's non-profit women's shelter get started. Sure, his itinerary looks strangely similar to his rival Penny's, but all's fair in love and syndication, right?

[THE BURBS AND THE BEES](#)

a novel by [Cathryn Fox](#)

I just inherited an apple orchard — a sentence I never would have imagined saying. The orchard is my chance to prove that I can do more than being a socialite. Also, if I can't tough out one month not only will I lose my self respect, I'll lose my trust fund too. But my hot bee farmer neighbor with the bad attitude and a whole lot of sexy seems hell bent on sending me home. Well screw him.

[A ROYAL DISASTER](#)

a *Royally Engaged* novel by [Jennifer Bonds](#)

Elena Murphy is doing just fine—if you don't count her struggling art studio, her ex-boyfriend suing her, and accidentally tossing purple paint onto the World's Most Eligible Bachelor, who also happens to be freaking royalty. Now she's getting dragged online. So His Royal Hotness decides the best way to fix the mess is to make her the envy of New York—by pretending to date. Because what's worse than dreamy nights at the theater and a nearly X-rated pottery

date with a prince? Reminding herself it's all fake.